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Danny Clinch



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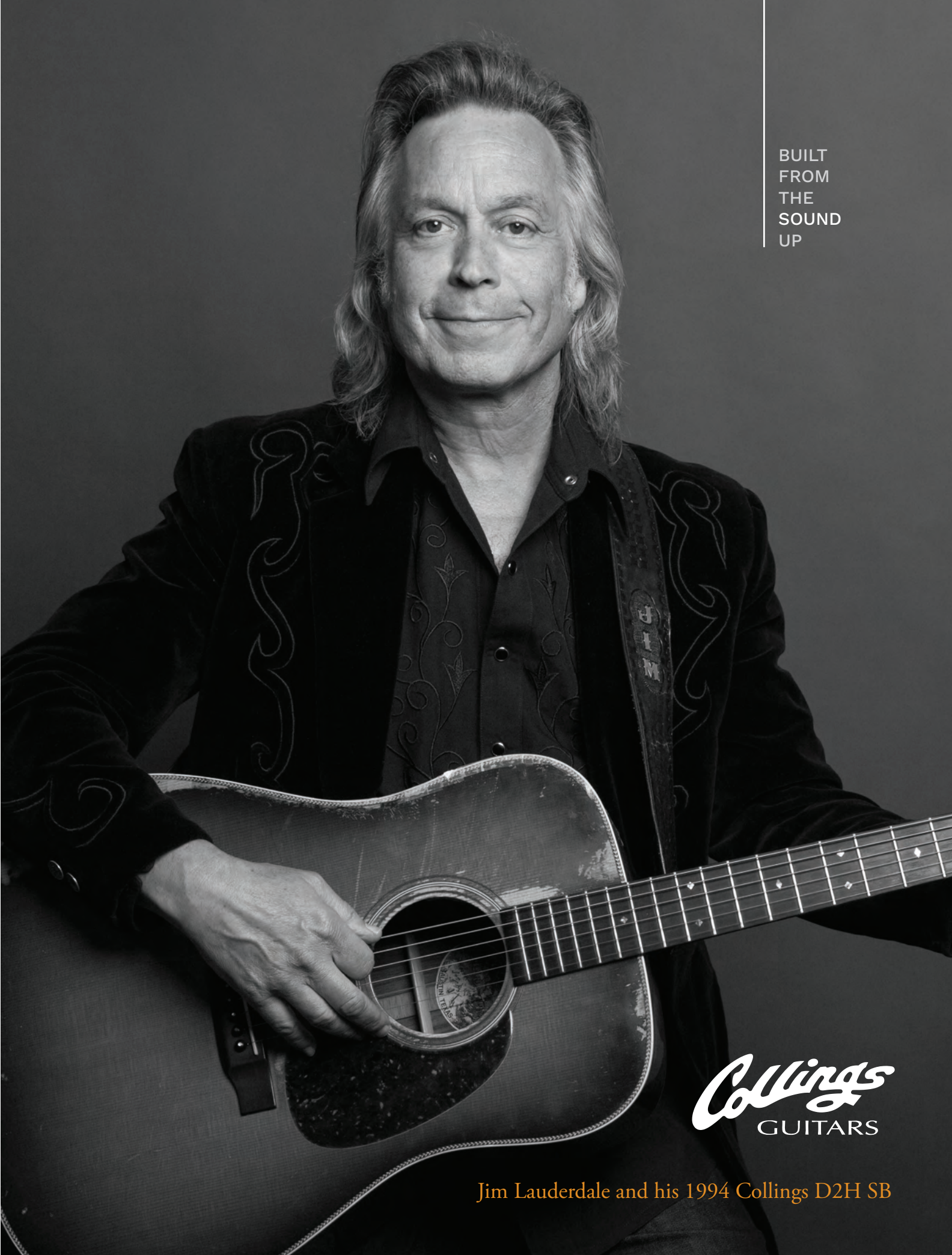
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Jerry Garcia's 1943 Martin D-28

By Blair Jackson

A black and white portrait of Jim Lauderdale, a man with long, wavy hair, smiling and holding a Collings acoustic guitar. He is wearing a dark, patterned shirt and a dark jacket with decorative stitching. The guitar is a Collings D2H SB, featuring a dark body and a light-colored pickguard. The background is a solid dark gray.

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Jim Lauderdale and his 1994 Collings D2H SB

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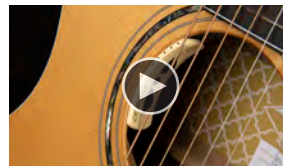
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THE FRONT PORCH

Frantz Casseus



MELVIN UNGER

I'll never forget the first time I heard Lucinda Williams. It was on a weeknight sometime in the early 2000s, at Sunny's Bar, a waterfront saloon at the remote edge of Brooklyn, New York, that had been around since the 1890s. At the time, my musical tastes leaned toward the challenging and the strident. But sitting there at Sunny's, enjoying a bourbon and hearing Williams' "Car Wheels on a Gravel Road," I had a revelation. Maybe it was the singer's rich, crackling voice and the Southern imagery of her lyrics, or her catchy flatpicked riffing on the acoustic guitar, but I suddenly sensed that in my snobbery I had been missing out on so much great music.

For this issue's cover story, Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers connected with Williams to talk about the rootsy but idiosyncratic guitar parts she plays on "Car Wheels" and a handful of her other best-known songs, each a study in smart accompaniment. Rodgers had hoped to film his conversation with Williams, she with guitar at hand, but unfortunately the singer-songwriter suffered a stroke in November 2020 and was in the process of starting over on the instrument. We at AG certainly hope that Williams will regain her facility on the guitar before long.

Also on the Southern theme, contributing writer James Volpe Rotondi, who lives in Nashville, profiles some of the singer-songwriters and acoustic guitarists who are defining the new Music City sound—Elizabeth Cook, Lilly Hiatt, Aaron Lee Tasjan, Lillie Mae, and Jake Workman—and covers some of the great guitar shops as well. Bob Minner, the extraordinary flatpicker likewise

based in the Nashville area, presents his new composition "VanWart," a tribute to the largely unsung luthier Bruce VanWart of Collings Guitars. (It's VanWart who personally selected the wood for your cherished Collings, and for the new CJ-45 T reviewed in this issue.)

Speaking of unsung, Frantz Casseus is considered in select circles to be the father of Haitian classical guitar, but his music and his stature are not well known in general. In his formative years, Marc Ribot—the New York-based guitarist and composer who on his 25 albums has explored everything from the music of Cuba to noise-jazz—studied classical guitar with Casseus. Ribot writes of Casseus' transnational aesthetic in *Woodshed*, while analyzing Casseus' "Dance of the Hounsies." I highly recommend you check out Ribot's recently reissued *Marc Ribot Plays Solo Guitar Works of Frantz Casseus*, as well as the composer's original recordings.

In *Great Acoustics*, my esteemed colleague Blair Jackson—who happens to have written a bunch of Grateful Dead-related books, including *Garcia: An American Life*—shares a great story about Jerry Garcia's 1943 Martin D-28 and its new owner. Though this golden-era dreadnought, with its replacement parts and plugged-up soundboard, might be a turn-off to purist Martin collectors, it holds a special place in popular music history, having likely been used on the Dead's *American Beauty*.

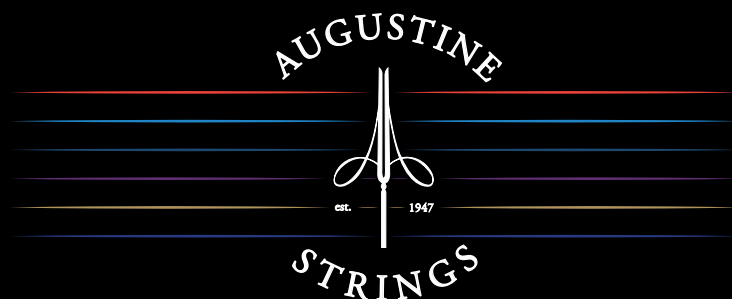
Thanks so much as always for reading, and please feel free to drop a line to let us know how we're doing.

—Adam Perlmutter

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GUITAR TALK



Unconventional Chemistry

Checking in with Tommy Emmanuel about his recent trio collaboration and more

BY KATE KOENIG

Guitar virtuoso Tommy Emmanuel has done many collaborations over his nearly 60-year career, to the point where they seem to flow out as naturally as his playing. At least, that's the way his latest EP, *Accomplice Series Volume 1*, with Rob Ickes and Trey Hensley came about.

Emmanuel has been playing with Ickes and Hensley since a 2016 show at the Palace of Fine Arts Theatre in San Francisco, where they discovered their lightning-in-a-bottle chemistry, and the EP came out of a simple idea to jam together without much premeditation. Emmanuel has a reputation for using unconventional guitar techniques (notably on display in his 2014 *Ted Talk*, "My Life as a One-Man Band"),

but *Accomplice Series Volume 1* is mostly just straightforward country and bluegrass.

Despite all the accolades and awards he has received, Emmanuel stays humble. "There are guys who can play rings around me," he says. "But I try to do different things; I try to write in my own way, and that's kind of how I stand out."

In terms of guitars, Emmanuel has been playing Matons for longer than he's been performing, and as a passionate acoustic player, he says, "Everything I need I can get with that instrument." The connection he has with that guitar is readily apparent on the EP. Chet Atkins' "Flatt Did It" shows off the spark between Ickes' dobro and Hensley and

Emmanuel's guitars, while Emmanuel's original "It's Never Too Late" offers a more pensive vibe enhanced by Ickes. I chatted with the Certified Guitar Player (an honor bestowed upon him by Chet Atkins) about the new release, his guitars, and the motivation behind his playing.

How did the new EP come together?

Well, I rang the guys and just said, "Let's record something together!" They came over to the studio, and we still hadn't even worked out what we were going to do. I said, "Here's this song that might be good for the three of us," and that's an old one called "Copper Kettle." I played it for them and they jumped on it. It came out really nicely. And then Trey and I had

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already messed around with “Raz-Ma-Taz Polka,” the Buck Owens song, so we went in and did that in one take—and filmed it and had a bit of fun!

Rob and I did a version of my song “It’s Never Too Late,” and that was his idea. When those guys opened for me in San Francisco the first time, Rob turned up at sound check and said, “Play ‘Never Too Late,’ and he just jumped in and did all these parts. He’d worked it all out. And it sounded beautiful, so we put it in the show. And we ended up recording it for this EP. It’s a unique sound, with a dobro mirroring and shadowing the melody. I gave him the solo in the middle, and he improvised that.

What’s it like blending styles with them?

Trey’s guitar style is different from mine, and it’s nice to have different voices to kind of mix together. Trey is a great singer, too. Every time we do shows together we end up singing quite a few Merle Haggard tunes and soloing and stuff like that. So those guys bring so much knowledge and expertise in that genre to the table.

Which song was the most fun to play?

Oh, they’re all fun to play! *[Laughs.]* That’s for sure.

Did you have a favorite?

Yeah, “Flatt Did It,” by Chet Atkins. It’s a whole bunch of Lester Flatt licks made into a song—such a cool idea. We needed one tune like that, a kind of roly-poly country song, where there’s a little answering to each other and all that. But yeah, I liked ’em all. They’re all a little bit different, and I think people who like what I do and people who like what Trey and Rob do are going to love this collaboration.

You’ve played Maton guitars for decades. What’s the story behind your history with the company?

Back in 1946, a guy named Bill May wanted to play and there were no guitars available [in Australia at the time], so he started building some. He was a furniture builder and had made himself a couple of guitars and a bass guitar as well, and they turned out really good. So, he got a whole bunch of people who put orders in, and he started this guitar company.

My first good guitar, which I got in 1960, was a Maton, and it’s in their museum now. They’re probably going to stuff me and mount me and put me in there, too. *[Laughs.]* But they’ve grown into a great company. When I started working with them, there were four people in the company, and now there are 75. But there’s still people sweating

over wood in there, which is what it should be like. You go to some factories and you can eat off the floor, and everything’s run by computers, but Maton still has handmade guitars and all that stuff. And they’re using all Australian woods as well.

What are some of the things about your Matons that you enjoy?

They have a particular acoustic tone. But they also have the best electronics of any instruments on the planet right now. I don’t think there’s any guitar with a pickup in it that can come close to what a Maton sounds like.

What is it that you prefer about the acoustic guitar over the electric?

Well, the acoustic is its own little orchestral kind of thing. It can be punchy and aggressive; it can be so sensitive. It’s just such a beautiful



sound. And plus, it’s not a sound that wears you out after half an hour. You can sit and listen to an acoustic guitar—with a good sound and a good PA and all that—for hours.

And electric wears you out?

Well, it depends who’s playing it. I just think the acoustic guitar is an instrument that is so expressive and it’s really up to the player. When I’m touring and playing concerts, I have three guitars with me, and I change guitars for two reasons: I’m playing some different songs in a different tuning on one of the other guitars, and then the third guitar is tuned down really low, like a step-and-a-half down, with big strings on it and it’s real deep, like a grand piano. So there are three different tones there and I can give the audience a break from one and go to the other. It’s a way of being versatile. And frankly, when I have different tunings, I play a little differently too, and it’s fun for me.

You have a reputation for using some unconventional techniques. Do you like turning your instrument into something other than a guitar?

It’s not really about the guitar. It’s really about what goes on when I’m playing. Something happens out there. I don’t know what it is—it’s not me. But when I play, people feel good; people smile and get happy. They forget everything and they’re totally caught up in it. That is entertainment, and that’s what I love. I love distracting people and entertaining them so they’re not sitting there thinking about their problems. I’ve got them right where I need them to give them a good time for a couple of hours, and then I have to let them go. And hopefully they’ll feel better when they leave the hall.

You’re known to improvise your set lists.

What guides you?

Probably the first thing to guide me is my experience. I’ve played a few shows in my life, and I know how to build it and how to have good dynamics. And some places, I can read the audience even before I walk out there. Like for instance, when I first started playing big halls in places like Sweden and Norway, the audiences were amazing. Their applause would knock you over with its volume. So, on the second tour, every show sold out and I thought, “My god, I better eat well tonight, ’cause I’m going to expend every bit of energy I’ve got for these people.” I went out and started the show with a ballad, playing a slow song. And the screams and yells at the end of that were amazing. I love the interaction with people, and I love to hear them let me know how they’re feeling and what they want.

I’m a performer myself, and I like to feel it out like that, too.

Exactly. Well, if you’ve got the songs, you can paint whatever you want out there and take people with you and it’s beautiful. That’s what I love about being in the music industry. It joins us all together. Music’s magic, you know?

I’m only there for the audience. I don’t give a damn about anything else when I’m up there. People say, “What’s going through your mind when you’re playing?” And I say, “The sound of my own music.” I’m examining my sound, my feel, my time, my tuning; I’m examining everything as I’m going along, because it has to be at the level that I know I can take it to.

But I have to be on my own case about everything and know that the sound is the best it can be—that my tuning is dead-on, my timing is in there. And if something’s not

right, my world, it goes upside-down. So it's a commitment to everything in every way.

A year into the coronavirus pandemic, do you miss being there for the audience?

I sure do. I play every day when I'm home, and I play for people who are in the house with me and all that. But there's nothing that can compare to walking out onstage and playing for an audience. That's the greatest feeling I know.

How many hours a day do you normally play?

It all depends on what's going on. Some days I play all day; some days I play an hour.

If you don't read or write music, how do you remember your compositions?

Repetition. As a musician, you've got to play that same stuff over and over and over so you can try to master it and get it down. When I'm playing, I'm not thinking about what my hands are doing. I'm listening to the music, and I'm pouring my emotions and my feeling into the music. I better have practiced it enough so my hands know exactly where to go and I can

'I think I'm just evolving as a player, and I hear things differently now than I did even a couple of years ago!'

-TOMMY EMMANUEL

make them do little trills or I can change the groove or something, so that I can do what I want musically and I'm free. If you're not free when you're playing the song, then you haven't practiced it enough. Practice is just as important as breathing.

Have you changed as a guitarist in recent years?

I think I'm just evolving as a player, and I hear things differently now than I did even a couple of years ago. I think I'm changing pretty rapidly. It makes me play stuff better. I've changed my lifestyle. I'm eating better; I quit drinking alcohol. I'm trying to be a pure channel. Whatever flows through me that the universe has in mind, I should be at the optimum place so that it can flow through me.

The only time I make a mistake on stage is if I allow my mind to wander. That's the biggest no-no. I remember Billy Joel saying, "I was singing 'Just the Way You Are,' and I was thinking, 'I wonder what the club sandwich is like back at the hotel.'" And then he goes, "That's when I realized I better stop singing that song." [Laughs.] **AC**

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Lucinda Williams

BLUE HIGHWAYS

Inside the songwriting and guitar world of Lucinda Williams

BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS

One of the pivotal moments in the musical life of Lucinda Williams happened long before she started playing guitar. She was around six years old, living in Macon, Georgia, and her father took her downtown to hear a street musician he'd discovered—a blind preacher named Pearly Brown, who sang gospel blues songs with propulsive six- and 12-string guitar and bottleneck slide.

"I remember standing there and holding my dad's hand, listening to this guy sing, and just being in utter amazement and bewilderment," Williams recalled. "It was so primal."

Brown's music, heavily indebted to slide master Blind Willie Johnson, was Williams' gateway to the world of country blues. And that music has inspired and guided her ever since, over her more than 40-year career as a singer-songwriter.

Williams is often described as a progenitor of Americana, an artist who blended folk, country, and rock before there was a marketing label for that combo. And she's got the Grammy Awards to prove it: 1993 Best Country Song ("Passionate Kisses"), 1998 Best Contemporary Folk Album (*Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*), and 2001 Best Female Rock Vocal Performance ("Get Right with God"). But blues and gospel run deep in her songwriting, as you can hear throughout her discography, from the gutbucket one-chord blues "Joy" to the spooky

"Pray the Devil Back to Hell" from her latest album, *Good Souls Better Angels*.

At 68, Williams is an icon of American songwriting, an inspiration to several generations of musicians for the way she's married the unvarnished sounds of roots music with a Southern literary sensibility. Through it all, she has developed a sturdy and distinctive rhythm guitar style, usually on a well-traveled Gibson J-45, that supports all of her songs, from brooding ballads to ragged rockers.

In May I connected with Williams by phone from her home in Nashville to learn more about her approach to songwriting and guitar, at what turned out to be strange time for an *Acoustic Guitar* interview. Not long before our conversation, she went public with the news that back in November 2020, she had a major stroke. Though her speaking and singing were unaffected, she was continuing to deal with arm and hand pain and struggling to relearn the guitar essentially from scratch. "I can make the chords, but I can't make my hand move between chords as quickly as it did before," she said. "I feel like when I first took guitar lessons."

Despite this unfortunate context, Williams gamely shared thoughts on her musical inspirations and idiosyncratic guitar style. What follows is a tour of her music by way of some of her best-known songs, with tab examples demonstrating her rhythm playing.

FOLK ROOTS

Williams first got her hands on a guitar—a Silvertone from Sears—when she was 12 and living in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Her father, the poet and creative writing teacher Miller Williams, found a local rock guitarist to give her lessons, and each week she learned a song, often drawn from the repertoires of '60s folk stars like Joan Baez, Gordon Lightfoot, and Peter, Paul and Mary. Along the way Williams picked up the basics of fingerstyle accompaniment, using a thumbpick and two fingerpicks. “One thing I’m really grateful about was learning those fingerpicking techniques, which I still use today,” she said. “I actually don’t know how to play with a flatpick.”

Albums by Baez and others also introduced Williams to traditional ballads, which she dug into through songbooks like the John and Alan Lomax collection *Folk Song U.S.A.* One favorite trad song, she recalled, was the train-wreck ballad “The FFV” (recorded by the Carter Family as “Engine 143”). No doubt folk ballads helped prepare Williams to tackle tragic stories in her own songs, from the life and death of Texas songwriter Blaze Foley in “Drunken Angel” to the harrowing account of domestic abuse in “Wakin’ Up.”

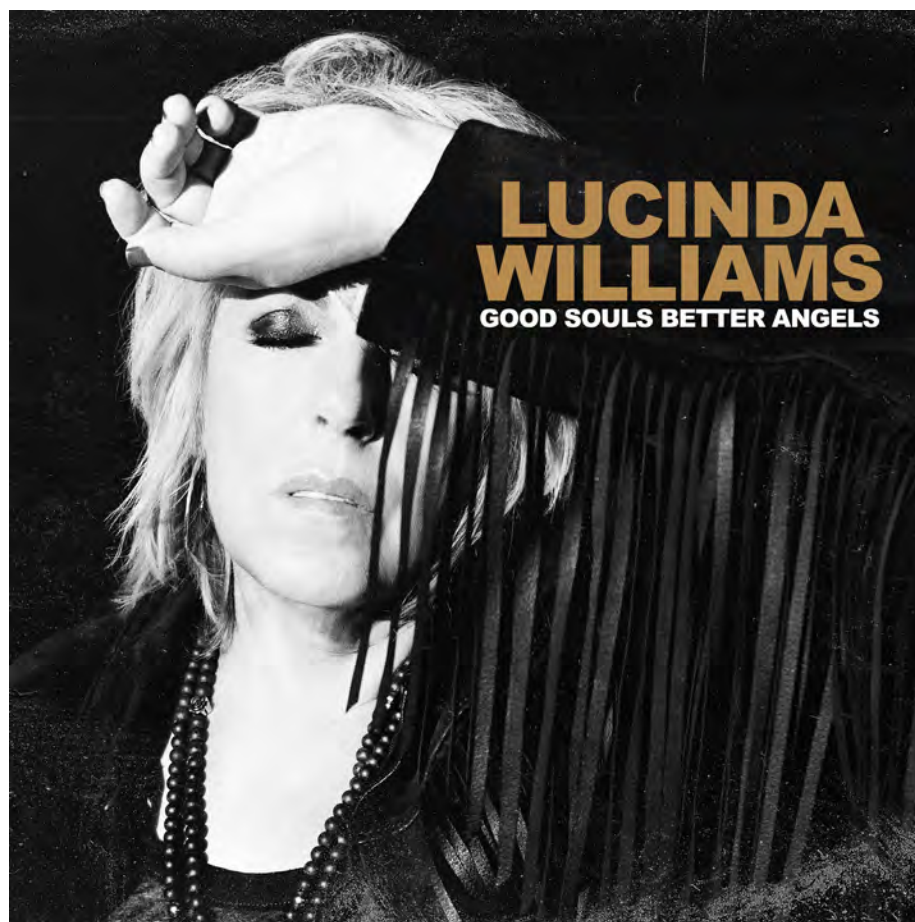
“I really got into the ballads, the English and Irish murder ballads, like ‘Banks of the Ohio’ and ‘Barbara Allen’ and all that,” she said. “Those are really good lessons in songwriting, ’cause they tell really interesting stories and they’re kind of dark and graphic. You know, a guy takes his lover into the woods and stabs her, blood’s running down her breast. . . . That stuff was really good to go through and learn.”

BLUE NOTES

One of the most impactful discoveries of her early years, as with so many other guitarists of her generation, was Robert Johnson. When a friend in Fayetteville, Arkansas, played her the Columbia album *King of the Delta Blues Singers*, she said, “It just blew me out of the water, you know? I mean, I’d never heard anything like it. It had this dirty, guttural sound, and also his lyrics really got me—it was like blues poetry.”

Williams put Johnson front and center when she made her recording debut with *Ramblin’ on My Mind* (later shortened to *Ramblin’*), released by Folkways in 1979. Along with several songs she learned from Pearly Brown’s record *Georgia Street Singer* (“You’re Gonna Need That Pure Religion” and “Motherless Children”), Williams played three Johnson songs, picking a 12-string and doing the songs her way.

The 12-string was a reflection of her earliest public performances. “I was playing out at antiwar demonstrations and all that in the



'60s,” she said, “and then when I got old enough and traveled to different towns, I was doing a little bit of busking on the streets. The 12-string was good for that, ’cause it was so much louder, and I really liked the sound.”

Example 1 shows the kind of rhythm pattern Williams used on “Ramblin’ on My Mind.” Unlike Johnson, who played slide on “Ramblin’” in an open tuning, Williams played in standard tuning, joined by John Grimaudo on six-string lead. Pick the down-stemmed notes with your thumb and the up-stemmed notes with your index and middle fingers. Williams uses a plastic thumbpick and metal fingerpicks, but you can adapt the basic pattern to however you play.

One of the hallmarks of Williams’ style, evident in her earliest tracks, is a strong groove, which she traces to her country blues inspirations as well as electric blues-rock bands like Cream. Early on, she said, “I didn’t have a band—that wasn’t till much later. So I guess I was improvising and just trying to get a beat thing going without having bass and drums.”

To create that kind of drive, strike the bass strings with your thumb or thumbpick forcefully enough to create a percussive slap, and

add a little thump on or near the bridge with the heel of your picking hand.

EMERGING AS A SONGWRITER

While her debut showcased Williams as a blues singer, at the same time she was coming into her own as a songwriter. While living in Texas in the '70s, she found a creative home at the storied Houston folk club Anderson Fair, which also nurtured such talents as Nanci Griffith, Lyle Lovett, and Townes Van Zandt.

Williams introduced herself as a songwriter on the all-original *Happy Woman Blues* in 1980, which—contrary to what the title suggests—leaned mostly away from blues and toward country and especially Cajun sounds, with fiddle-heavy acoustic arrangements. But it wasn’t until 1988’s *Lucinda Williams*, produced by Gurf Morlix and Dusty Wakeman, that she hit her stride as a singer-songwriter and recording artist, with a core sound built around a combo of acoustic rhythm and electric lead guitars that she has relied on ever since.

Lucinda Williams featured such tracks as the two-chord rocker “Changed the Locks,” later covered by Tom Petty, and the song that vaulted her career: “Passionate Kisses,” a

**Example 1 (à la “Ramblin’ on My Mind”)**

(♩ = ♯♩)

Example 1 is a guitar exercise in 4/4 time, featuring a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The exercise is divided into three systems, each with a guitar staff and a bass staff. The guitar staff shows a melody line with various chords indicated above it: E7, A7, E7, A7, E7, B7, A7, E7, and B7. The bass staff shows a bass line with fingerings (0, 1, 2, 3) and a consistent rhythm. The exercise is marked with a tempo of 120 beats per minute (♩ = ♯♩).

Example 2 (à la “Side of the Road”)

Capo IV

Example 2 is a guitar exercise in 4/4 time, featuring a key signature of one sharp (F#). The exercise is divided into two systems, each with a guitar staff and a bass staff. The guitar staff shows a melody line with various chords indicated above it: C, G, Am, F, and G. The bass staff shows a bass line with fingerings (0, 1, 2, 3) and a consistent rhythm. The exercise is marked with a tempo of 120 beats per minute (♩ = ♯♩).

megahit for Mary Chapin Carpenter (see Acoustic Classic on p. 62).

Example 2 is based on “Side of the Road,” another standout from the album in which the narrator walks out into a field, craving a moment of independence, while her lover waits in the car. The image that sparked the song, according to Williams, was the Andrew Wyeth painting “Christina’s World”—which depicts a young woman lying in a field gazing toward a farmhouse—coupled with her feeling at the time of being trapped in a relationship and losing her creative spark.

“The song is really saying that I want to go back to my life when I felt I was more in control of things and felt more creative,” she said. “I’d go through these dry spells with my writing, and that would freak me out.”

On the album track, Morlix played electric riffs over Williams’ acoustic strumming—she uses a thumbpick like a flatpick. In solo performances, she adds the kinds of simple embellishments shown in the example. The notation shows a single-note picking pattern, but feel free to add adjacent strings while holding down the chord shapes. In songs like this, her right-hand technique is a mix of fingerpicking and strumming—akin to banjo frailing.

Williams’ collaboration with Morlix continued on 1992’s *Sweet Old World* (then fell apart during the making of its follow-up, *Car Wheels*

Lucinda Williams in 2003



DANNY CLUNCH

Example 3 (à la “Sweet Old World” 2017) Capo II

Example 3 is a musical score for guitar, featuring a single-note picking pattern. The score is divided into two systems, each with a treble clef staff and a guitar staff. The first system includes the chords C/G, F/c, G, and C/G. The second system includes the chords Dm and G. The notation shows a single-note picking pattern, but feel free to add adjacent strings while holding down the chord shapes. The guitar staff includes fret numbers and string numbers (1-6) for each note.

System 1:

- Chord C/G:** Treble clef: C4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), G5 (quarter). Bass clef: C3 (quarter), G2 (quarter), C3 (quarter), G2 (quarter).
- Chord F/c:** Treble clef: F4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), F5 (quarter), C5 (quarter). Bass clef: F3 (quarter), C3 (quarter), F3 (quarter), C3 (quarter).
- Chord G:** Treble clef: G4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), G5 (quarter), B4 (quarter). Bass clef: G2 (quarter), B2 (quarter), G2 (quarter), B2 (quarter).
- Chord C/G:** Treble clef: C4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), G5 (quarter). Bass clef: C3 (quarter), G2 (quarter), C3 (quarter), G2 (quarter).

System 2:

- Chord Dm:** Treble clef: D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D5 (quarter), F4 (quarter). Bass clef: D3 (quarter), F2 (quarter), D3 (quarter), F2 (quarter).
- Chord G:** Treble clef: G4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), G5 (quarter), B4 (quarter). Bass clef: G2 (quarter), B2 (quarter), G2 (quarter), B2 (quarter).



on a Gravel Road). The title track of *Sweet Old World* is one of Williams' best ballads, a meditation on the life experiences lost to suicide. Emmylou Harris, a longtime friend and champion of Williams, beautifully covered the song on her seminal album *Wrecking Ball*.

Williams herself remade the entire *Sweet Old World* album 25 years later and released the results as *This Sweet Old World*, and it's interesting to compare her renditions. **Example 3** is based on her 2017 redo; her acoustic is central, and she plays more slowly and a step lower than in the original—capo 2 rather than 4. (Over the years, she has lowered the capo position in many songs to match her voice.)

The example follows the first part of the verse progression. Play the C chords with a sixth-string G in the bass—her typical voicing for a C—and use an F/C as well. Often she strums the low strings together rather than playing single bass notes. At the end of measure 2, lift up the F shape and play the open second and third strings—this anticipates the G chord and also gives you a moment to change shapes. You'll find similar transitions in Example 5.

ON THE ROAD

For fans and critics alike, a high point of Williams' career is the Grammy-winning *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*, from 1998, which last year cracked the top 100 in *Rolling Stone's* list

of the 500 greatest albums of all time. The process of making *Car Wheels* was notoriously long and convoluted (first tracked in Austin with Morlix, redone from scratch in Nashville with Ray Kennedy and Steve Earle, and finally completed in Los Angeles with Ray Bittan of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band), but the resulting tracks feel vital and visceral.

'Both of my grandfathers were Methodist ministers, so that preaching thing was in my blood already'

—LUCINDA WILLIAMS

In the title track, Williams evokes images of her Southern childhood—though she was unaware she was writing from her own experience until her father later pointed it out. Williams often doesn't know what she's tapping into when she writes. "I hate to sound like a cliché, but sometimes I feel like I'm a vehicle for the song coming through," she said. "I just go into that place, let it flow out, and write it down, and then I'll go back and edit—kind of fix it and turn it into something."

Example 4 is based on the flatpick-style intro for "Car Wheels." Toggle between D and Am shapes (capo 4), with some hammer-on embellishments, before landing on the I chord (G).

In "Jackson," another highlight of the *Car Wheels* album, she evokes the simplicity and directness of the folk songs she grew up on (and also tips her hat to the song with the same title made famous by Johnny Cash and June Carter). "Sometimes we have to get out of our own way as songwriters," she said. "Sometimes I'll think about the early folk songs and country songs and how simple they were in their chord structure and everything. I have to remind myself that it doesn't have to be real complex. I try to imagine, 'What would Woody Guthrie do?' and put myself back in that place."

Williams says she didn't play the fingerpicking part on "Jackson" on *Car Wheels* (she thinks it was Morlix or Earle). Instead, **Example 5** shows the type of pattern she uses live—a thumb/brush, with a bit of chord melody, reminiscent of the Maybelle Carter style. Capo at the third fret to play in the album key.

LEAD LINES

Throughout her music, Williams has partnered with top-notch lead guitarists who've helped shape her sound, including Morlix, Doug Pettibone, and, currently, Stuart Mathis. All have added signature riffs that became

Example 4 (à la "Car Wheels on a Gravel Road")

Capo IV

The musical notation for Example 4 is presented in two systems. The first system shows the first two measures, with chords D and Am indicated above the staff. The second system shows the next two measures, with chords D, Am, and G indicated above the staff. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The guitar staff uses a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with hammer-ons and pull-offs. The bass staff uses a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with a focus on the low strings.

inseparable from her songs—as with Morlix’s jangly riff on “Passionate Kisses” (transcribed on p. 63).

“After I’ve written the song, generally the process is I’ll do an acoustic demo with just me and guitar, and then I’ll send that to the guys in the band and let them listen to it for a while and soak it up,” she said. “When we go in the studio, I just let them do what whatever comes to them. I don’t ever tell them, ‘Play these notes’ or anything.”

Example 6 shows the riff played by Pettibone that opens and anchors “Fruits of My Labor,” released in 2003 on *World Without Tears*. Languid and haunting, the song is back in the spotlight this year thanks to a cover by the indie band Waxahatchee.

On *World Without Tears*, Williams strums “Fruits of My Labor” with a capo at the first fret, and Pettibone plays out of the same position on electric with heavy tremolo. For the harmonized lines on the first and third strings,

play fingerstyle or use hybrid picking, grabbing the lower note with a flatpick and the upper note with your middle finger.

‘One thing I’m really grateful about was learning those fingerpicking techniques, which I still use today.’

—LUCINDA WILLIAMS

GHOST STORIES

While Williams’ records have gravitated toward a gritty acoustic-electric sound, her songwriting always retains a connection to the acoustic folk she cut her teeth on. One notable example is

“The Ghosts of Highway 20,” the title track from her acclaimed 2016 album, reminiscent of traditional ballads by way of Bob Dylan.

Williams said the idea behind the song first came when she played a show back in Macon, which she found surprisingly unchanged from how she remembered it in the ’50s. Leaving the city on the tour bus, she began thinking about how much of her childhood was strung along Highway 20. “Sometimes memories are like ghosts,” she said. “They hang around and you can’t get rid of them, and they torture you sometimes. You could think of it this way too: The blues artists who lived in those areas and are buried around there, they’re literally blues ghosts, you know?”

Example 7 is based on the verse pattern in “The Ghosts of Highway 20” as she performs it live, in E minor (the album version is in D minor). Play a steady alternating bass throughout, over Em, C/G, and B7 shapes. Add treble notes sparingly with your fingers on the

Example 5 (à la “Jackson”)

Capo III

C/G

F/c

C/G

G

G6 G7

F/c



C/G F/c C/G

Example 6 (à la "Fruits of My Labor")

Capo I

G Am 1. C 2. C

Example 7 (à la "The Ghosts of Highway 20")

No capo

Em *play three times* C/G

Em C/G Em

B7 Em

offbeats. On the B7, play along with the vocal melody as you go back to Em.

BACK TO THE WELL

Williams' 2020 album, *Good Souls Better Angels*, brings her full circle—right back to the sounds and themes of the gospel blues she heard Pearly Brown play on the street in Macon some 60 years ago.

Williams has always been drawn to religious language and imagery. “Both of my grandfathers were Methodist ministers, so that preaching thing was in my blood already,” she said. “My dad wasn’t a fundamentalist by any means, but I was still exposed to the hellfire, brimstone, and all the music that goes along with that. I was just intrigued by it, and I was also inspired by Southern writers like Flannery

O'Connor and Eudora Welty, who wrote a lot about that small-town religious fanatic stuff.”

Example 8 shows a sample of the rhythm pattern in “Pray the Devil Back to Hell,” going between E7 and C/G with a capo at the third fret. Use a percussive slap on the backbeats marked with x and emphasize the bass, adding subtle hints of the underlying chords.

Also on *Good Souls Better Angels*, Williams revisits another early inspiration, Memphis Minnie, with a rewrite of Minnie’s song “You Can’t Rule Me.” While the original song uses a I–IV–V progression, Williams strips it down to one basic chord, and her defiant lyrics take on political overtones.

Electric strumming drives “You Can’t Rule Me” on the album; **Example 9** shows how

Williams plays it acoustically (check out the duo performance she taped for NPR’s *Tiny Desk*). Alternate thumpy bass notes with slaps, like a kick and snare. In measures 2 and 4, do a quick slide up to the third fret on the low string.

With a voice deepened and weathered over the years, Williams has never come closer to the “dirty, guttural sound” she admired in Robert Johnson.

“It’s kind of like what the Black Keys have been doing,” she said. “I totally understood where they were coming from the first time I heard them, ’cause I knew they were channeling that Delta blues stuff.

“It’s just the best music. It comes from a place that’s so deep and primitive and raw. There’s nothing like it.” **AC**

Example 8 (à la “Pray the Devil Back to Hell”)

Capo III

Example 8 shows a 4-measure phrase in E7 and C/G chords with a capo at the 3rd fret. The notation includes a treble clef staff with notes and a bass staff with fret numbers and 'x' marks for slaps.

Example 9 (à la “You Can’t Rule Me”)

Capo III

(♩ = ♪♩)

Example 9 shows a 4-measure phrase in E7 chord with a capo at the 3rd fret. The notation includes a treble clef staff with notes and a bass staff with fret numbers and 'x' marks for slaps. A 2/3 time signature is indicated.

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LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

José González records a warm new album at his summer home in Sweden

NICK MILLEVOI

Much of the charm of *Local Valley*, the fourth album from the Swedish-Argentinian singer-songwriter José González, comes from its intimate production values. González's guitar and vocals lie at the center of the mix, both captured almost exclusively by a single Neumann U67, giving the record a consistent and focused sound, whether he's using his Esteve 9C/B, or Córdoba Rodríguez nylon-string guitars. On the sonic periphery, González fills out his songs with creative overdubbing, light drum-machine grooves, and field recordings of birds. This simple but intentional approach draws the ears into each song and, rather than making the music sound polished or produced, creates a cozy setting for each track.

The sound of *Local Valley* is a logical next step for the guitarist. Throughout his career—which has included three solo albums, two full-lengths and several EPs with his band Junip, and placements in a long list of television shows and the soundtrack of a prominent feature, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*—González has established a singular brand of soft-spoken songwriting and practical production techniques. The musical atmosphere on *Local Valley* reflects not only his recording process but the warm home environment in which he created the record.

In 2019, González and his partner, Hannele Fernström, purchased a house in Hakefjorden, about an hour outside of their hometown of Gothenburg, Sweden, where González set up a dedicated home studio. As he explained during our interview, the beautiful view, the sounds of their life, and the pace of their time spent in Hakefjorden began to shape and influence the recordings as he began crafting a follow-up to 2015's *Vestiges & Claws*.

While the feeling of sitting in a sunny home on a Swedish fjord is the lens for the album's 13 tracks, the

songs themselves take us far beyond that place. González draws musical inspiration from a wide breadth of influences, from folk rock to music from Latin America to direct inspiration from a one-off jam with Tuareg guitarist Bombino. Meanwhile, González wrote lyrics in each of his three of his languages—English, Spanish, and Swedish—creating a rich and dimensional portrait of a songwriter whose artistic vision is delivered with a rare sense of humility and grace.

I called González while he was walking near his home in Gothenburg to discuss the inspirations behind the writing and recording of *Local Valley* and to gain some insight on what he believes to be his most personal album yet.

This is the first time you recorded in your new place in Hakefjorden. How is it different than the kitchen in your home in Gothenburg, where you've previously recorded?

What's different now is that I have the view with trees outside. I have neighbors, but they're far away, so I can play pretty loud and play my music from a speaker, which I couldn't do in the kitchen [in Gothenburg]. All the neighbors were closer, and I felt like they could hear me. I felt like they could get annoyed if I was playing the same thing three days in a row. So, I felt freer this time in many ways. Sound-wise, it's a lower ceiling and it's all wood. In the kitchen, it's a bigger room and there is more reverb.

Do you take advantage of not being on a schedule?

Yes and no. I know that I need continuous time—many weeks in a row or many months in a row. I don't need to work eight hours a day, but as long as I do something



every day it's easier to reach the level that I want to reach. It starts with really basic stuff and I just refine it until it sounds amazing, to my ears.

I just need to get up and do stuff every day. I'd rather have this informal way of working. In this case, I've been out walking in the woods or taking a swim in the ocean or planting grass in the garden.

Your partner, Hannele Fernström, sings on "Swing" and your three-and-a-half-year-old daughter inspired you to write one of the songs. Do you think the involvement of your family is a result of working at home?

I think so. When I invited Hannele to sing, it was pretty late in the recording; the album was almost finished, and Hannele was already making the album cover. She also helped to write the lyrics on "Swing." That one, we did in the utility room in our apartment.

This record is in English, Spanish, and Swedish. What does it mean to you to sing in all three of your languages?

For me, it feels like I'm finally able to be a bit more me. Before I was always writing in English—it was the easy thing to do and I got used to it when I was a teenager. Of course, Spanish and Swedish are my two mother tongues. I'd been trying to write in both for quite some time and it didn't feel right, but finally I am able to show more of myself on the album in the lyrics, both with the languages and the themes of the songs, which are more in tune with what I think about in my day-to-day life.

Was it intuitive to know what language a song would be in?

I had songs for *Vestiges & Claws* where I tried to write in Swedish and Spanish and it didn't work out. When looking at the notes, I see that I was about to write about a different topic in the other languages. When I start writing in a language, depending on the words I find that rhyme, I get different lyrics.

I wrote "Swing" in Swedish first. That version is still playful, but less cool—it's too much of a children's song. In trying to rewrite it, it became a different song. I asked Hannele to translate it or rewrite it and while doing that we found other words. The sentiment of swinging or dancing was the same.

When did you first start playing nylon-string guitar and what drew you to it?

I started when I was 13, first by playing The Beatles, Silvio Rodríguez, and bossa nova. A year later I took it to the next level by learning



classical guitar. Apart from a Casio synth and a flute, it was the only instrument we had at home. But as soon as I started, my father got very excited and saw the opportunity to revisit the songs he used to sing with his friends back in Argentina. I learned a lot by looking through tablatures and singing with my dad.

Is there something about nylon-string you prefer over steel-string?

I probably just got used to the sound as a kid—no hard feelings toward steel-strings! I love the round sound from a Spanish classical guitar, especially when played softly, because flamenco shows that you can play loudly with the same guitar and then it's a completely different sound. The times I like steel-string guitars, it's mostly with old strings, like Nick Drake played.

How do you choose which of your guitars you used on a given song?

The guitars have different resonances; the bigger one [Esteve] seems to resonate in A and the smaller one [Córdoba] in G. It's not super important, but it does give slightly different flavors to the songs, which is good when I'm trying to vary the impressions on an album. On

the song "Valle Local" I used the smaller guitar with very old strings—I'm happy with how old-school it sounded.

It sounds like you're using quite a few tunings throughout the album.

It's a few different tunings. "El Invento" is dropped D, "Visions" is D A D A B E. Maybe half of the album is E A D A B E—I think "Void," "Horizons," "Head On," and "Lasso." "Honey Honey" and "Swing" are B A D A B E. One fun thing is that I use the capo on five out of the six strings on "Lasso." I do that sometimes where I retune, but it works better to leave one note outside of the capo.

On "Visions," "Lasso," and "Honey Honey," there are bird sounds, almost as if you were recording with the window open.

I was writing and recording many times with the window open, so that was the birds I was hearing. When you have a close mic you don't really hear them, so I actually had to record them on their own with a stereo mic. I tried them out in different songs. For a moment, all of the songs had birds, but that was too much, so I had to choose a couple of songs and once I

chose the track order if felt natural to have them in the beginning, middle, and end.

You've said that "Valle Local" and "Head On" were inspired by a jam you had with Bombino and I think the Tuareg sound is pretty evident in the parts you're playing on those tunes.

He was on tour in Europe and my manager put us in contact to see what would happen. We invited him to Gothenburg and he had an off day, so he took the time to come here and hang out. We had this jam session in a studio and it was great just sitting next to him. I had a couple of riffs to start it off and it was just amazing; he followed me and basically took over. We had one day that was really fun and we had to leave it at that, just a fun jam session.

We set up a solo show for him in the evening where he played alone, just an acoustic guitar and a stompbbox and that was very inspiring to see. I like him with a band, but it's just different when it's acoustic and just him. I continue to be inspired by music from that area of Africa. I'm mimicking to a certain extent, but also I find my own version of what I'm hearing and it becomes some sort of hybrid.

Had you ever played with a Tuareg musician before?

Yeah, I got to be a guest with Tinariwen once in Stockholm and once in London. Before that I did a short tour with Sidi Touré, so I've had my fair share of seeing amazing guitarists up close.

Were there any specific insights you learned from playing with Bombino that you applied to those songs?

I had already studied the style of the Sahel desert by listening to records and playing along and seeing these other musicians, but with Bombino it was slightly different because he was able to make it sound so much his own. With Sidi Touré and Tinariwen, they are groups, so there's less pressure on any one person to perform. With Bombino, he had it nailed down how to make it sound rich and full. That's always been my aim, to think in terms of a solo classical guitarist, how you can make a room sound full.

More specifically, I was surprised how much he played with just his thumb and index finger. There's not that much arpeggiating going on, just thumb and index and a lot of hammer-ons and pull-offs. There's a lot of notes just bubbling, but not that many fingers on the right side.

You cover [Iranian-Swedish singer-songwriter] Laleh's "En stund på Jorden."

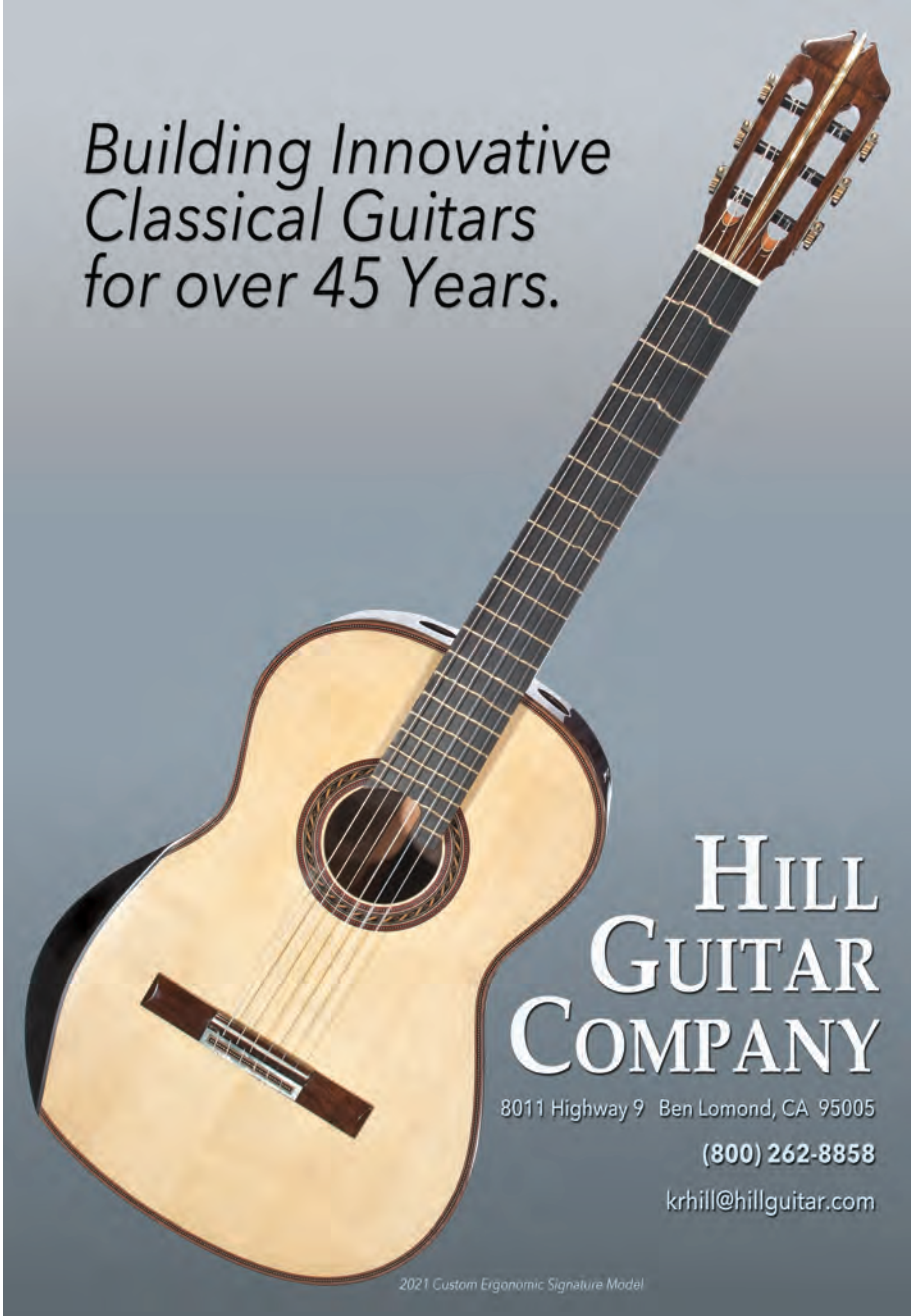
Why did you choose that song?

Laleh is also an artist from Gothenburg—now she lives in L.A., but we're from the same neighborhood. The title means "a moment on earth," and she wrote this song when her mom died. It's a song about death, but to me it's always sounded uplifting and very humanistic, and that appealed to me a lot. I wanted to have a song that reflects the finite part of being human apes on earth in a poetic way and that song was just perfect.

Can you tell me a little more about what you're trying to convey in your lyrics?

Ever since my second album, I wanted to have another layer to my music. So, I have an agenda of trying to make secular music that doesn't sound dull. I want to have the same depth as sacral music from churches; I want to have lyrics that have this worldview underneath but still feel rich and add more poetry to the naturalistic way of life.

There's part of me that has matured. The first album was a lot about inner struggle and how to combat inner demons or about relationships. The older I get, the less of those thoughts I have and it's more about the world and humanity. **AG**



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ACOUSTIC GUITAR AUCTION REPORT

A 1943 Martin 000-18, a 1999 custom engraved National Tricone Style 4, a 1965 Di Giorgio Serie Artistica Autor No. 3, and a 2008 Collings D42 were highlights among the 19 guitars sold in *Acoustic Guitar's* most recent online instrument auction, which ran from May 13 through May 27. Nearly 100 bidders participated, also purchasing instruments from esteemed small shops Santa Cruz, Lowden, Goodall, and Hill; individual luthiers Jeff Jewitt and Peter Wicklund; international powerhouses Taylor, Gibson, and Alvarez-Yairi; and brands that are gone but hardly forgotten, Langejans, Mossman, and Tacoma.

In addition to pleasing the lucky buyers and satisfied sellers, the auction also benefitted the Bill Collings Memorial Fund, which supports guitar education in public schools and programs.



2006 Alvarez-Yairi WY1BR
\$1,450



2014 Collings 02H Concert
\$3,700



2008 Collings D42 Varnish Dreadnought
\$10,600



**1965 Di Giorgio Serie Artistica
Autor No. 3 Nylon-String** \$2,150

Acoustic Guitar Auction



1997 Gibson ES-135 Semi-Hollow Electric
\$1,650



1998 Gibson ES-175 Hollowbody Electric
\$3,450



1993 Gibson J-200 VS Jumbo
\$4,000



2003 Goodall Concert
\$2,800



2017 Jewitt OM-MPL Orchestra
\$2,100



2002 Kenny Hill Munich Nylon-String
\$2,000



2004 Langejans RGC-6 Concert
\$2,700



2016 Lowden S50
\$5,560



1943 Martin 000-18 Orchestra
\$7,500



**1999 National Tricone Style 4 Custom
Resonator** \$9,000



**1974 S. L. Mossman Flint Hills Special
Dreadnought** \$2,200



2012 Santa Cruz 00 Grand Concert
\$4,555

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The next *Acoustic Guitar* auction starts February 18, 2022 and closes February 28, featuring 20 noteworthy guitars, including examples from Petros, Martin, Gibson, and Taylor. For information about becoming a seller or buyer, please visit:

Auctions.AcousticGuitar.com

CAN WE ADD YOUR NAME TO THE LIST?

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CHAD MOREHEAD

As anyone who's hopped a flight to Nashville for a boisterous three-day weekend well knows, Music City almost literally lives and breathes guitar. Is the tip-off the giant Les Paul guitar sculptures that greet you at the arrival gate at Nashville International Airport, or the Gibson and Martin display cases and BMI posters that dot the baggage area? Maybe it's the legendary Lower Broadway strip, where more than 30 venues proudly host live bands from before lunchtime to well after 1:00 a.m. *every single day*.

Maybe it's the (world-class) guitar stores, including the twin pillars of Gruhn Guitars and Carter's Vintage Guitars (see p. 48). Or maybe it comes down to the rich history of American music that thrives here still; the medial presence of iconic figures from Roy Acuff to Bill Monroe to Hank Williams to Dolly Parton to George

Strait to Reba McEntire to Alan Jackson to Garth Brooks to, yes, Taylor Swift, all of whom you can visit in spirit at the Country Music Hall of Fame, on Demonbreun Street. Or you can check out the Musician's Hall of Fame. Or the Ryman Auditorium. Or maybe wander back over to Layla's or Robert's Western World to see the Hall of Fame's future residents.

Even before Nashville's huge economic boom began back in the early 2000s, the city had begun a similar expansion of its musical soul. Artists like Wilco, Lucinda Williams (see p. 18), and Ryan Adams, and publications like *No Depression* and *American Songwriter* had already put Americana on the map as a genre, tipping their hats to heroes like John Prine, Loretta Lynn, Gram Parsons, The Band, and Kris Kristofferson. But the generation of songwriters who would rise in its wake—including

modern titans like Jason Isbell, the Avett Brothers, Brandi Carlile, Sturgill Simpson, Margo Price, and Chris Stapleton—would now begin to compete for serious cultural real estate with the likes of establishment country artists like Jason Aldean, Miranda Lambert, Sugarland, and Kenny Chesney.

Nashville's thriving traditional bluegrass, soul, and gospel scenes have flourished anew, as well, billowing out of venues like the legendary Station Inn and finding new life in the hands of artists including the Punch Brothers, Alabama Shakes, Rob Ickes, the Dillards, Old Crow Medicine Show, Nicole Atkins, and frequent Music City visitors like the Carolina Chocolate Drops and Rhiannon Giddens. Heck, Nashville is even home to a roll call of remarkable rockers, as well, from Jack White and Kings of Leon to the Black Keys and Damon

NASHVILLE NOW

*Music City's horizons are wider and woodier than ever.
Meet five mavericks pushing into the new frontier.*

BY JAMES VOLPE ROTONDI



Johnson. In fact, all those threadbare genre denominations are getting thinner and less relevant by the day.

In this special section, we'll grab a sweet tea with several of the passionate, driven songwriters, performers, and players who are shaping the evolving sound of Nashville now, including Elizabeth Cook, Lilly Hiatt, Aaron Lee Tasjan, Lillie Mae, and Jake Workman. And we'll chew the fat with vintage guitar icons George Gruhn, Walter Carter, and other proprietors of Nashville's finest guitar stores. It is only a drop in the bucket, of course, so vast and diverse is Nashville's ocean of guitar talent. Still, while these acoustic warriors may or may not exactly answer to the name of outlaw country, each one has found a defiantly individual and eclectic pathway through what might simply be called, once again, the Nashville Sound.

Do keep in mind that the venerable acoustic guitar tradition is *strong* here: Whatever leading-edge production techniques they may tap, or however they may bend genres, each of these singular six-string devotees has made the acoustic guitar their key partner in writing the next chapter of Nashville's story. If there's a through line to all of these myriad new directions in country and Americana, you can bet it has a spruce top.

ELIZABETH COOK **STRUMMING UPSTREAM, NOT MAINSTREAM**

It sure looks like a Martin, but it's not—it's a handsome blond Lincoln D699, a now-rare, law-suit-era Japanese Martin copy made in the early 1970s. Although it's in disrepair now, with "a completely cracked bridge" that she aims to fix,

it's the guitar that Nashville firebrand Elizabeth Cook first remembers. Indeed, even before she first laid eyes on it, Cook *felt* it. "That's the guitar my mother played in the honky-tonks while she was pregnant with me," recalls the Florida native.

Cook, an outspoken, magnetic personality whose critically acclaimed albums—like her latest, 2020's *Aftermath*—along with her fun fishing show *Upstream* on the Circle Network and appearances on David Letterman's show, have made her a refreshing if unlikely mainstream heroine. "That Lincoln guitar is an absolute horse of a guitar: big, booming, and well-built," Cook announces, "and it'd have to be, given the alcoholic rages my daddy put it through. But in my embryonic state, my head would have been right up against it, just resonating with that guitar."

Even before the Butch Walker-produced *Aftermath* was released to acclaim, Cook was



Elizabeth Cook

already a seasoned veteran by Nashville standards, having moved to Music City in 1996, landing a coveted if ultimately frustrating publishing deal, and releasing the accomplished *Hey Y'all* in 2002 and *Balls* in 2007, with its striking title track, “Sometimes it Takes Balls to Be a Woman.” “Back then there was no Americana Music Association, no [independent entertainment company] 30 Tigers, or anything like that,” Cook recounts. “There were eight major labels, and that was it. There wasn’t much I could latch onto as a young singer-songwriter, but eventually that started to shift, and I guess I stuck around long enough to walk into that somehow.”

When she landed her first publishing deal, Cook also landed her first guitar, or rather, one that wasn’t associated with her past but her future: a new Martin DM dreadnought purchased at the original Lower Broadway location of Gruhn Guitars. “I got the cheapest Martin they had at the time, only \$700 or so, but to me it was special. This was the first guitar that wasn’t connected to my family, wasn’t connected to those honky-tonks—not a good scene for a child—or the gospel services at the Sunset Park Church of God, where I’d sing stuff like Dottie Rambo, Vestal Goodman, and the Gaither Gospel Singers. See, music for me had always been about family or religion—for other people. This Martin DM was the guitar for *my* journey, for the break I had to make in determining what my music would be about.”

And what is her music about? “My stories are about country people,” says Cook, who also plays a Gibson Dwight Yoakam Honky Tonk Deuce, a

Fender PM-2 parlor, and a Fender Acoustasonic Stratocaster. “I often say that my perspective is earnest and my experience is rural.” As ebullient as Cook can be, though, there’s a sense of foreboding, dry humor and eventual deliverance evident in songs like “Dyin’” from 2016’s *Exodus of Venus*, *Aftermath*’s fingerpicked “Mary, the Submitting Years,” and the ballad “Two Chords and a Lie,” a waltz-feel stunner with drop-dead lines such as, “It’s a friendly reminder of how love is blind/ You might find her buried alive/ With a hand reaching up at your local dive.”

Nevertheless, Cook has accumulated some wisdom about the vulnerability; the open-book quality she brings to nearly all of her hard-lived songs. “Look, once you finally write that song about something painful, or some loss,” she says, “that’s when you begin to feel fortified that you survived it in the first place. There’s this little resurgence of strength, like a cool drink of water. You feel it hit your body, and then it gently fires you up to where you feel like your engine is at least . . . *humming* again. That you’re OK—you’re alive.”

AARON LEE TASJAN COSMIC COUNTRY-POP, REINCARNATED

Drop the needle on Aaron Lee Tasjan’s latest LP, the wide-ranging *Tasjan! Tasjan! Tasjan!*, and you’ll encounter a voice that evokes Roy Orbison’s liquid vibrato, Harry Nilsson’s purity of tone, and Gram Parsons’ sweetness of delivery. The boy sure can sing. Underneath those sharp melodies and timely productions, moreover, are sophisticated chord changes and a deft acoustic guitar technique that pays homage to

Travis-picking; folk music from Nick Drake to Nancy Griffith; the acoustic side of T-Rex’s Marc Bolan; the Eagles; fellow Ohio native Tim Easton; and Paul McCartney’s “Blackbird.”

Oh, and did we mention . . . Count Basie? “My first big guitar hero when I was learning to play was Freddie Green from the Basie Band,” says the 34-year-old singer-songwriter, one of East Nashville’s favorite sons and rising stars. “Now, Freddie’s thing was big heavy strings on a Stromberg archtop guitar, and he didn’t even use an amp—he would just lock in with Basie’s drummer, Jo Jones, and the sound was huge.” At just 16, Tasjan took his love of Green’s two- and three-note voicings to the stage at Lincoln Center’s Essentially Ellington Competition, where, on songs like “Warm Valley” and “Rocks in My Bed,” he’d take the prize for Best Instrumentalist. “I think I was the only kid at the whole festival who didn’t take a solo,” Tasjan smiles.

After living in New York City and plying his trade as an electric guitarist with bands like Semi-Precious Weapons and the New York Dolls, Tasjan moved to Nashville in 2013 and began focusing as much on his songwriting skills as his fretboard mastery. His self-released debut album, 2015’s *In the Blazes*, he explains, was “a conscious move toward country and Americana, because I wanted to make a record that would be relevant for Nashville, which is such a song-based town. But I also wanted to show that I could *play* that music—basically, to find some work for myself!”

The album hit home for many of Music City’s songwriters and tastemakers, led to a record deal with New West Records, and



CURTIS WAYNE MILLARD

Aaron Lee Tasjan



DAVID MCCLISTER

Lilly Hiatt

inspired Tasjan to up his music theory game in the interest of ever more sophisticated progressions. Take, for instance, the lovely C#dim7–E figure that’s central to his song “If Not Now When.” It’s a smart, slinky riff—doubled in a lower register by Tasjan’s gifted guitar accomplice Brian Wright—that evokes ragtime and Robby Krieger in equal measure. But commercial country music, it ain’t.

“A lot of the more popular country music seems to revolve around the IV chord,” Tasjan observes. “Either the verse or the chorus very often starts on the IV, but it always seems to occupy some central role in the song.” Maybe it’s his admiration of bands like King Crimson and Moby Grape, Tasjan offers, that make him look squarely at “the harmonic landscape of the song and ask, ‘What harmonies *aren’t* being used? Can I do something with *that* instead?’”

With his Fishman Infinity-loaded, late-’60s Gibson J-40, a 2018 Gibson Hummingbird, and a pair of Loar LH-250s, Tasjan takes those rich chords into the stereo field during his solo shows by splitting his signal through a Strymon Deco Tape Delay pedal and a BOSS DD-6 Delay—one side hits a direct box before going to the front of the house, and the other gets plugged into a Fender Princeton Reverb amp behind Tasjan on stage. He even close-mics the guitar for good measure. That said, his secret for great live tone is really no secret at all.

“I’ve spent years honing my fingerstyle playing to a level where I can incorporate it into my shows with confidence,” says Tasjan, whose *Karma for Cheap: Reincarnated* LP is perhaps the best place to hear his unadorned acoustic

motifs. “So, while I do use Dunlop Tortex picks for certain things,” he tells me, “even a lot of the strumming I do is with the tops of my fingers. I just like the way it sounds—so much softer than with a pick. Also, for some of the older generations of musicians, if you’re not fingerpicking at all during your show, they’re kind of thinking your whole thing could maybe be . . . *bullshit*, y’know?”

LILLY HIATT

LITTLE GUITARS, BIG MIND, RESTLESS HEART

“The heart of my songwriting process is intimately tied to the acoustic guitar—it’s such a true friend,” says Lilly Hiatt, the literate roots-rocker whose acclaimed albums like 2015’s *Royal Blue*, 2017’s *Trinity Lane*, and her latest, *Walking Proof*, have made her a favorite of roots cognoscenti and indie-rock tastemakers alike. But while she may frequently sport a Rickenbacker 360 these days, Hiatt’s songwriting muse is channeled through two very special acoustic guitars: a 1953 Martin 00-18 (gifted to her by her father, the celebrated songwriter John Hiatt) and a rare 2007 Gibson J-200M, the coveted limited-edition mini J-200 that Gibson only produces in small batches every few years.

“They’re like little jewels,” says Hiatt of both instruments. “I just love smaller guitars, parlor guitars. They’re very warm, and each just has a ton of character; the Martin being the slightly darker of the two.” While tracks like “Everything I Had,” “I Wanna Go Home,” and “Rotterdam” find chiming Rickenbackers

and tough Teles weaving through the mix, the backbone and midrange color for the tunes is Hiatt’s driving, rough-and-ready acoustic rhythm hand. “I do go hard on my rhythms,” she laughs. “I like a hard, tight kind of strumming, but I also like a certain looseness where I allow myself to let open strings ring out, even the ‘wrong’ notes sometimes.”

Hiatt opts for Dunlop .73mm Tortex picks—enough give for acoustic strumming, but enough bite for electric bashing. For acoustic strings, she leans on D’Addario EJ16-3D Phosphor Bronze Acoustic Lights (.012–.053). She owes her fondness for the Rickenbacker 360, she says, to her talented lead guitarist John Condit, who first introduced her to that mighty chime factory.

Along with her cherished small-body guitars, Hiatt’s other song-crafting soulmate is the almighty capo, which she uses not just to find the sweet spot in her vocal range but also to change the character of the instrument for fresh inspiration. She places her Kyser capo on the first fret for the moving “The Night David Bowie Died”; on the third fret for *Walking Proof*’s opener, the sisterly homage “Rae”; and on the fifth fret for “Drawl,” from that same album. “I sing a lower melody on ‘Drawl,’” she explains, “but putting the capo on fret 5 enables me to do that in a place that isn’t quite so low, where my voice is still at home. Capos are incredible tools: They can really change the way you relate to your guitar.”

Still, it’s relating to her subject matter that has ultimately earned her so much affection among fans. Hiatt is direct, not above tossing a few



RUSS CARSON

Jake Workman

expletives into her songs, and channels her personal struggles into often stirring self-portraits and odes to the foibles of human connection. “I’ve had a lot of ‘a-ha’ moment with songwriting,” she says. “Maybe because it’s in the act of writing lyrics down that you learn how you really feel. Like, I really love this person. Or, I’m really worried about that person.”

“Though I can be pretty wordy at times,” she continues, “I love it when really ordinary imagery and language can carry a song, like in ‘Trinity Lane,’ which is just the main street near where I live. That’s me, sitting in my house, observing what’s around—very straightforward. That approach can leave a little more wonder for the listener to set the scene and find the feelings for themselves.”

JAKE WORKMAN FLOATING WITH CONFIDENCE

Like other virtuoso players his age, before 33-year-old Utah-bred picker Jake Workman turned his focus to the deep fields of bluegrass, he cut his teeth idolizing heavy metal guitarists like Eddie Van Halen, Nuno Bettencourt, Eric Johnson, and Paul Gilbert, and he still counts that generation of players as among his favorites.

The thing is, while it’s one thing to play those blinding shred runs on a thin-necked electric with low action and a set of .09s, it’s quite another to make them sing on an acoustic guitar strung with .13s with high action. So how does he do it?

“I guess I’m just not willing to sacrifice tone for playability,” shrugs the self-effacing

guitarist for bluegrass legend Ricky Skaggs and Kentucky Thunder. “My action at the 12th fret is just a hair under 3mm, and yeah, it’s difficult at times, especially if there’s no capo clamping the lower frets. I admit that’s pretty heavy, pretty stiff, but it’s worth it; I just hate a buzzy tone, man.”

With two of the surest—and evidently strongest—hands in the trade, Workman’s tone is both present, singing, and robust, supported by a premium rig that includes two Collings acoustics: a 2007 D1 A V with an Adirondack spruce top and mahogany back and sides, and a D2HAT with an Adi top and Madagascar rosewood back and sides. Each Collings is loaded with a K&K Trinity Pro System and strung with D’Addario EJ17 Mediums (.013–.056). When he’s flatpicking, Workman likes the snug feel of a Blue Chip TP60 or TPR60 pick, along with an Elliott capo, as required.

Check out the 2020 IBMA Bluegrass Guitar Player of the Year as he positively cooks over a quicksilver alchemy of country, bluegrass, Irish rounds, blues, and acoustic rock idioms on his debut solo album, *Landmark*. “It’s both a landmark for me in my career,” Workman grins, “and an album of songs that were written largely on the road from towns and cities across the world.” It’s while touring, says Workman, that he really dives into his intensive practice regimen. It’s also where gems like the charmed changes of “Charleston to Dublin” were born. “I just spend all my time practicing and writing when I’m on the road,” Workman says. “It’s my chance to really get it done and get that creative and practice time in.”

It sure pays off. Right from *Landmark*’s barn-burning opener, “Down in the Dirt”—which also features extraordinary fiddle playing by Jake’s wife, Rebekah—Workman’s enviable mastery of bluegrass technique is in evidence, from dizzying alternate bass patterns, crazy crosspicking, Norman Blake-inspired chord transitions, wicked G runs, and, of course, that cascading Steve Kaufman/Tim Stafford-esque “floating” technique.

“A question I get all the time when I give lessons,” posits Jake, “is ‘How do you transition from a lower position to an upper position?’ I mean, you could just jump from one position to another, right? But to smoothly transition, there are two ways for me: either a slide or a float, or a mixture of the two. Floating is when you introduce open strings into your line, sometimes via pull-offs; the idea being not to play the same string twice in a row for that particular run. It’s almost like melodic banjo playing, and it produces this nice, smooth, waterfall effect.”

With a degree in jazz guitar performance from the University of Utah, it’s perhaps not surprising that Workman has an evolved approach to the art of functional harmony. But while you’ll hear an intriguing blend of unexpected chords in his music—from minor v chords to Lydian augmented sounds—Workman is anything but precious about it. “I never think in terms of scales or modes anymore, actually,” he says. “If you want a flatted seventh in your major-leaning song, just use a flatted seventh. Why suddenly picture the whole Mixolydian mode just for one note?”



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COURTESY OF L.R. BAGGS

Lillie Mae

"The question is: what flavors do you want to give this song? And what notes will *function* in the desired way over a given chord? If you find a way to balance dissonance and resolution in a smart way, you can get away with a lot more than you think. The main thing is to play it with confidence," Workman concludes. "Even if you play so-called wrong notes, but you play them with confidence and resolve those tensions to the triad, you can absolutely make those notes sound 'right.' That's my golden rule, anyway."

LILLIE MAE GUITAR AND FIDDLE WITH PLENTY OF PUNK PLUCK

When most of us were still playing with trucks or dolls, Lillie Mae Rische was already toying with the acoustic guitar, strumming the Beach Boys' "Sloop John B" and singing its classic chorus of "I wanna go home, let me go home" at the tender age of four. "I just loved that song," she recalls. "Acoustic was my first instrument, along with piano, and it remains my main songwriting tool. It wasn't until I was seven that I first picked up the fiddle."

While the violin is the instrument she may be best known for—especially owing to high-profile touring gigs with the likes of Robert Plant and Jack White—Lillie Mae is a sophisticated guitarist whose songs betray a grasp of technique and music theory she claims is almost entirely unschooled. That said, it's hard to miss the clever use of half-diminished seventh chords, mixed fingerpicking patterns, and odd-time arpeggio figures that appear on

her heartfelt and musically impressive 2018 album, *Only Girls*.

With production from Dave Cobb, who's helped transfigure albums by Brandi Carlile, Sturgill Simpson, and Chris Stapleton, *Only Girls* has an open and roomy sound—think Pink Floyd rocking a gothic square dance. Lillie Mae's voice is able to command the entire room, even on a Bluetooth speaker.

"I suppose I started fingerpicking because when I was playing the fiddle, I would often pluck the strings with my right hand, especially when I was singing," says Lillie Mae. As she held the violin bow between her index finger and thumb, Lillie Mae developed a unique picking style based on the middle, ring, and pinky, an approach she still exploits today, often using a filed-down thumbpick for extra definition. "Thumb-middle-index-ring-pinky is one I'll find myself using," she notes, "as well as the kinds of patterns you'll hear in bluegrass music, like the pattern in the Louvin Brothers' classic 'Kentucky.'"

Some of Lillie Mae's favorite fingerstylists include legends Jim Croce and Jerry Reed, and, closer to home, Nashville pickers like Luke Skidmore, as well as her equally gifted guitar-playing brother Frank Carter Rische. Lately, her love of fingerstyle has led Lillie Mae to fall under the spell of harp players like Joanna Newsom and Timbre Cierpke: "I've been trying to incorporate that technique into my playing," she offers. "Making a harp-like sound by working the strings back and forth, a continuous strumming flow without breaking the sound. The thumb, with a thumbpick,

and index finger are a big part of that, but you may need to bring the other fingers in as well. I'm dying to get a harp guitar—that would be so cool."

For *Other Girls*, Lillie Mae leaned on a clutch of guitars, including her very first acoustic—a 1970s Harmony dreadnought with tuning pegs so tight she tunes the whole thing down a whole step—as well as a Martin D-18V and a Gibson LG with an L.R. Baggs Anthem pickup, loaned to her by Jack White, who produced *Other Girls*' fine predecessor, *Forever and Then Some*.

Lillie Mae prefers medium or heavy D'Addario phosphor bronze strings and heavy Dunlop Tortex picks. As for electronics in her violin—a rare European model from the 1800s strung with D'Addario Helicores—and her guitars, she says it's got to be L.R. Baggs: "Absolutely L.R. Baggs across the board. Their pickups are just the best."

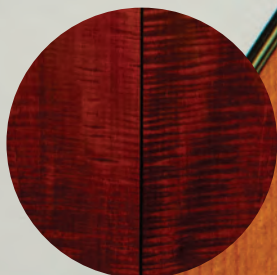
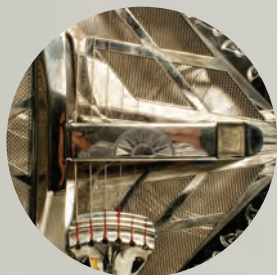
Getting back to her penchant for colorful chords, Lillie Mae says it owes to her earliest and most formative musical memories, as part of the Rische family band with her parents and siblings. "With the family band, we were always arranging classic songs so that they'd be different and not just knock-offs," she says. "From doing that so early on in life, it's just ingrained in me to try unusual ways of tweaking a chord progression, or just following the melody I hear in my head and adjusting the chords to make sense with *that*."

"This is why co-writing can be a little challenging for me at times," she continues. "I'll be throwing ideas out there, but no one's biting!"

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Gruhn Guitars offers new and used instruments, at press time including a 1966 Ramirez José Flores flamenco, a 1953 Martin D-28 customized for Charlie Louvin, and a 1932 Dobro roundneck. The mural at Fanny's House of Music on the corner of Holly and 11th Streets has become a local landmark.

DOES NASHVILLE HAVE THE BEST GUITAR SHOPS IN THE COUNTRY? *INSIDE MUSIC CITY'S TEMPLES OF SPRUCE*

"We believe music has the power to heal, not just entertain," says Pamela Cole, who in January 2009 opened Fanny's House of Music with partner Leigh Maples. The shop is a Nashville landmark in part due to the much-visited mural painted on its exterior that features an all-female cast of guitar icons from Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Loretta Lynn to Joan Jett and Joni Mitchell.

Fanny's, which sells a raft of preowned acoustic and electric guitars, accessories, and even vintage clothes, sits at the intersection of Holly and 11th Streets in East Nashville, perhaps the neighborhood most associated with the city's huge change in demographics—and real estate prices—over the last two decades.

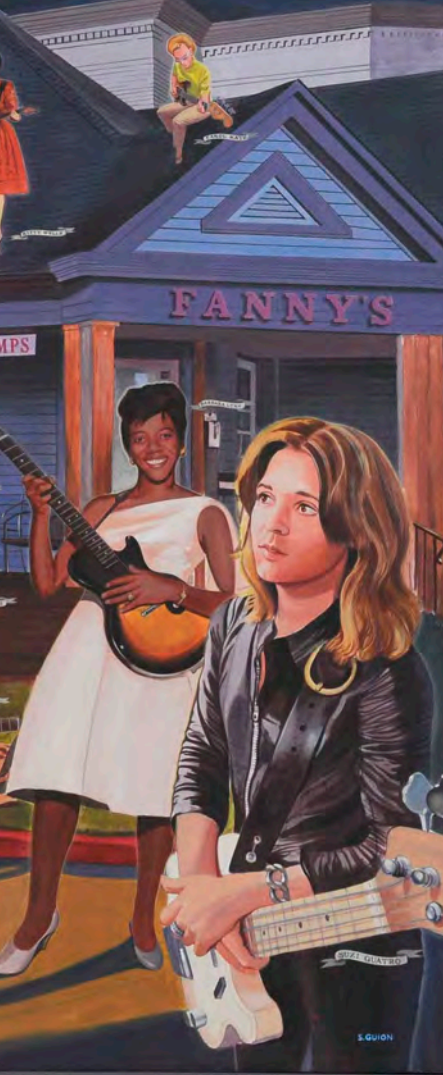
"This community really embraced us from the beginning, when we only had five guitars, three amps, and ten pick packs," says Cole. "As Nashville has grown, so have we. In fact, we've even started a nonprofit called Fanny's School of Music, an addition to our store that will add ten lesson rooms, a music therapist's office, and a second-story community space/performance area."

Through the devastating tornado of March 2020, quickly followed by the pandemic, Fanny's, like the many other guitar stores across Nashville, has had to think fast and adapt to the changes not only in the city's diverse new population but also in the guitar market itself.

"We started out in 2000 as a vintage guitar store, and we still are, so that much hasn't changed," says Walter Carter of Carter's Vintage Guitars, well-known to aficionados as the co-author of the seminal Gruhn's Guide to Vintage Guitars. "But the growth and popularity of Nashville has had a huge impact on our business. We started right around the time the TV show *Nashville* started airing, and that, along with our good location, a certain name recognition, and the success of many of our YouTube videos shot live here, has been very good for us."

For the vintage guitar buyer, Carter's is a veritable fantasy park, a place where you can see the very Stratocaster that Ed King recorded "Sweet Home Alabama" on, alongside a prewar Gibson L-00, a 1940 Martin D-18, and makers like Taylor, Larriveé, Sahlstrom, Gallagher, Preston Thompson, Blazer & Henkes, and more. Carter says that while the baby boomers who kicked off the vintage guitar explosion back in the '80s may be buying fewer guitars these days, they're perhaps more likely to be selling them.

"Yeah, those same folks who bought these guitars 20 years ago are now providing a good supply back to us, so you don't have to go out and shake the bushes quite like you used to. That said, we still get instruments from people who've had them under the bed or in the closet for decades—y'know, 'This was my grandpa's guitar'—and every so often, if you get lucky, they're just pristine." Carter's own fan club



Carter Vintage Guitars (top) is known for its great selection of classic guitars and its famous YouTube videos featuring big-name guitarists. The acoustic room at the vast new Gibson Garage retail space in downtown Nashville.

includes players like Brian Setzer, Molly Tuttle, JD Simo, Billy Strings, Marcus King, and Chris Thile, all of whom have dropped in to play a few licks for the Carter camera and take in the woody ambiance.

It's hard to even think about guitar shops and Nashville without invoking Gruhn Guitars, the now-legendary mecca for pickers that started life on Lower Broadway in 1970, and eventually moved to a less frantic and much larger location in the 8th Avenue South neighborhood back in 2013. While Eric Newell now largely runs the day-to-day affairs, Gruhn himself—a true original, famed for his surly prophesying and unequalled well of vintage guitar knowledge—still embodies the store's rigorous attention to detail.

Surprisingly, this most dedicated of vintage guitar experts is remarkably positive about the current generation of guitar building. "The new guitars from Martin, Taylor, Gibson, Collings, Santa Cruz, Larrivé, and others are competing very strongly with the vintage stuff," Gruhn says, "which was not the case back in the 1970s, where a lot of the guitars had been dumbed down by bean counters who really didn't know anything about guitars. But the quality of new guitars today, while perhaps not quite as good as, say, the golden era pre-CBS Fenders or the [Ted] McCarty-era Gibsons, are pretty darn good. This is why a high percentage of what I'm selling now is new.

"Look, I still have a soft spot in my heart for vintage instruments," he admits, "but if a customer has a choice of spending \$4,000 on one of our Gruhn-exclusive Martin Sinker Mahogany D-18s, versus

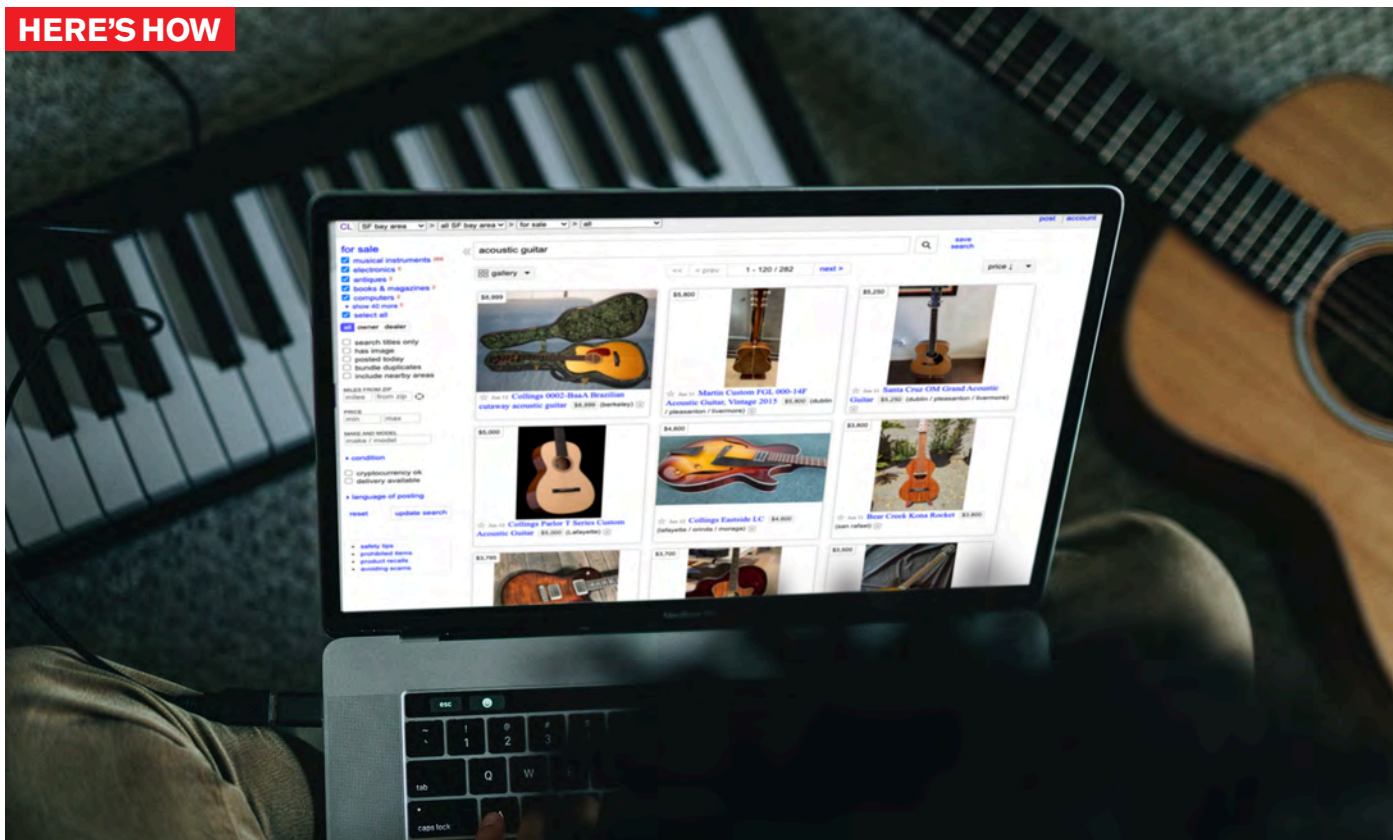
spending upwards of \$60,000 for a 1937 D-18, they'll take the new one every time. And the new one comes surprisingly close."

Downtown Music City's freshest retail space is surely the new Gibson Garage—imagine a sort of Apple Store meets Disneyland for everything Gibson, and I mean everything: "Every model that Gibson, Epiphone, Kramer, Mesa/Boogie, and KRK make is available and on the floor," says Mark Agnesi, Director of Gibson Brand Experience. And on the ceiling. The massive 8,000-square-foot retail space is crowned with a rotating track packed with hanging Les Pauls, Juniors, SGs, ES-335s and more. The acoustic room alone, brimming with J-200s, J-45s, Hummingbirds, Epiphone Frontiers, and others, is bigger than many standalone stores. "A few years back," Agnesi explains, "JC Curleigh (see profile on p. 70) asked us all, 'So where's the place to go for the ultimate Gibson experience?' And we didn't have an answer. So we decided to build one."

Gruhn Guitars, Carter's Vintage Guitars, Fanny's House of Music, and the new Gibson Garage are just a few of the noteworthy outlets that cater to Nashville's many professional players, budding hotshots, happy hobbyists, and passionate vintage collectors. That surplus of retail riches also includes class outfits like Rumble Seat Music, Artisan Guitars, The North American Guitar, Lane Music, Eastside Music Supply, Corner Music, and more. While there are those who believe the continued exodus of guitar players traveling or moving to Nashville is simply a case of "bringing sand to the beach," from a retail perspective, Nashville is clearly a beach that can continue to accommodate as much sand as washes up on its shores. —JVR

With a little research and good communication, guitar deals can still be found online.

HERE'S HOW



SOUNDTRAP

The Price Is Right

A guide to smartly and safely buying used guitars from private sellers

BY GREG OLWELL

It's late, and the house is quiet except for the sound of you shopping online for guitars. For some of us, daily checks of our local Craigslist or Facebook Marketplace tap into our inner hunter-gatherer—except we're looking for guitars we may or may not need, instead of berries and woolly mammoths. Buying from a private seller can be a great way to get a guitar at a good price or even a steal. But if you don't know what to look for or what questions to ask, you could end up with an instrument with issues that will make it expensive to repair or difficult to resell.

While finding a cool guitar online can be rewarding, it can be difficult to resolve any issues after the sale. I once bought a Santa Cruz Guitar Company dreadnought on eBay that appeared to be in excellent condition. It wasn't until after the shipment arrived and I opened the case I learned, owing to a foul smell, that the previous owner was obviously a heavy cigarette smoker—a deal breaker for

me. Buying can be risky because private sellers tend not to offer the same policies as professional dealers, such as a 48-hour approval period or even a return policy. Because of this, it's the buyer's responsibility to ask questions ahead of time.

If your exchanges with the seller don't feel right, know that it's OK to walk away—there's probably another guitar just a few clicks away that meets your needs. And watch out for sellers who can't answer questions about the guitar's origins or any work that may have been done. But armed with some caution and knowledge of what to look for, you could end up with a treasured guitar.

1 DO THE HOMEWORK

Decent photos of a guitar are a must when buying online. Beyond eye candy, these images can tell you many things about an instrument's condition. Even beginners can learn a lot by examining the photographs in a

listing. If you're unsure about the specifics in the listing, check out some websites and professional shops that offer definitions. Then, see if those terms match the seller's description. If they don't, you may have some leveraging power for adjusting the price. It's also generally a good idea to avoid ads that use a manufacturer's photos instead of the actual photos. But if the description and price really grab you, just ask for pictures of the exact item for sale—and take it as a big red flag if the seller is unresponsive to that request.

Doing a little research, either online or through a price guide such as the *Blue Book of Acoustic Guitars* or the *Official Vintage Guitar Price Guide*, can help you determine if you're paying a fair price or not. Regardless of where the guitar is offered, many sellers appear to be setting asking prices based on those listed on the online marketplace Reverb.com. Note that the asking price is often higher than the actual selling price, so it can pay off to do your

homework. Sites like eBay and Reverb allow you to sort for recently sold items, which can provide accurate information on a particular guitar's current market value. But remember to compare apples to apples, because condition is everything when buying used.

2 WORK OUT THE DETAILS

Once you're ready to pull the trigger, you'll need to agree with the seller on the details of the exchange. The best practices for in-person deals will differ slightly from a sale that requires shipping, but both demand a few simple precautions you can take to make sure that your sale is safe.

For online sales that may require the use of a payment service like PayPal, some venues suggest that buyers use the service's buyer protections. On acousticguitarforum.com the classifieds section recommends that buyers avoid scams by selecting PayPal's Goods and Services (about 1.5–1.8 percent for a typical guitar sale) for payments instead of the free Friends and Family option. Be sure to check with your preferred payment service, as some other services, like Venmo, do not offer such protections.

**If your exchanges
with the seller
don't feel right,
know that it's OK
to walk away.**

Craigslist focuses on local in-person cash sales and doesn't offer shipping solutions or buyer protections like eBay or Reverb. Buying gear here can feel a little more like the Wild West. But it doesn't have to be risky. Craigslist's own guidelines recommend avoiding any transaction with a party that is unable or refuses to meet in person. They claim that following this rule will "avoid 99 percent of scam attempts." A well-trafficked and convenient public place like a café or grocery store parking lot can be an excellent place to complete your deal, potentially providing more safety over meeting at the buyer's home.

3 CLOSE THE DEAL

Once you have the guitar in hand, it's time to give it a thorough inspection. Begin by making sure that it is the same instrument that appeared in the ad and that its condition was accurately represented. Do

the serial numbers match? Is there damage that wasn't disclosed or visible? Many experienced guitar shoppers will immediately look at the neck, as its condition can tell you much about a guitar's health. Look for signs of warpage along the fretboard, especially where it meets the body, or high action at the 12th fret, which can indicate the need for a neck reset.

If your purchase requires shipping, the seller might have established a shipping cost, but you may be able to negotiate if you have a preferred shipper. Clear communication and

a friendly tone will go far in managing expectations during the sale and might be more important here than at any other stage. Keep in mind that you might be rated as a buyer on Reverb or eBay!

Once the deal is closed, you're ready to make the guitar yours with a cleaning, a fresh set of strings, and any minor adjustments that might be needed, like cleaning and lubricating the tuners or adjusting the truss rod. After that, you can kick back and start picking, knowing that you got a great guitar for a great price.

AG



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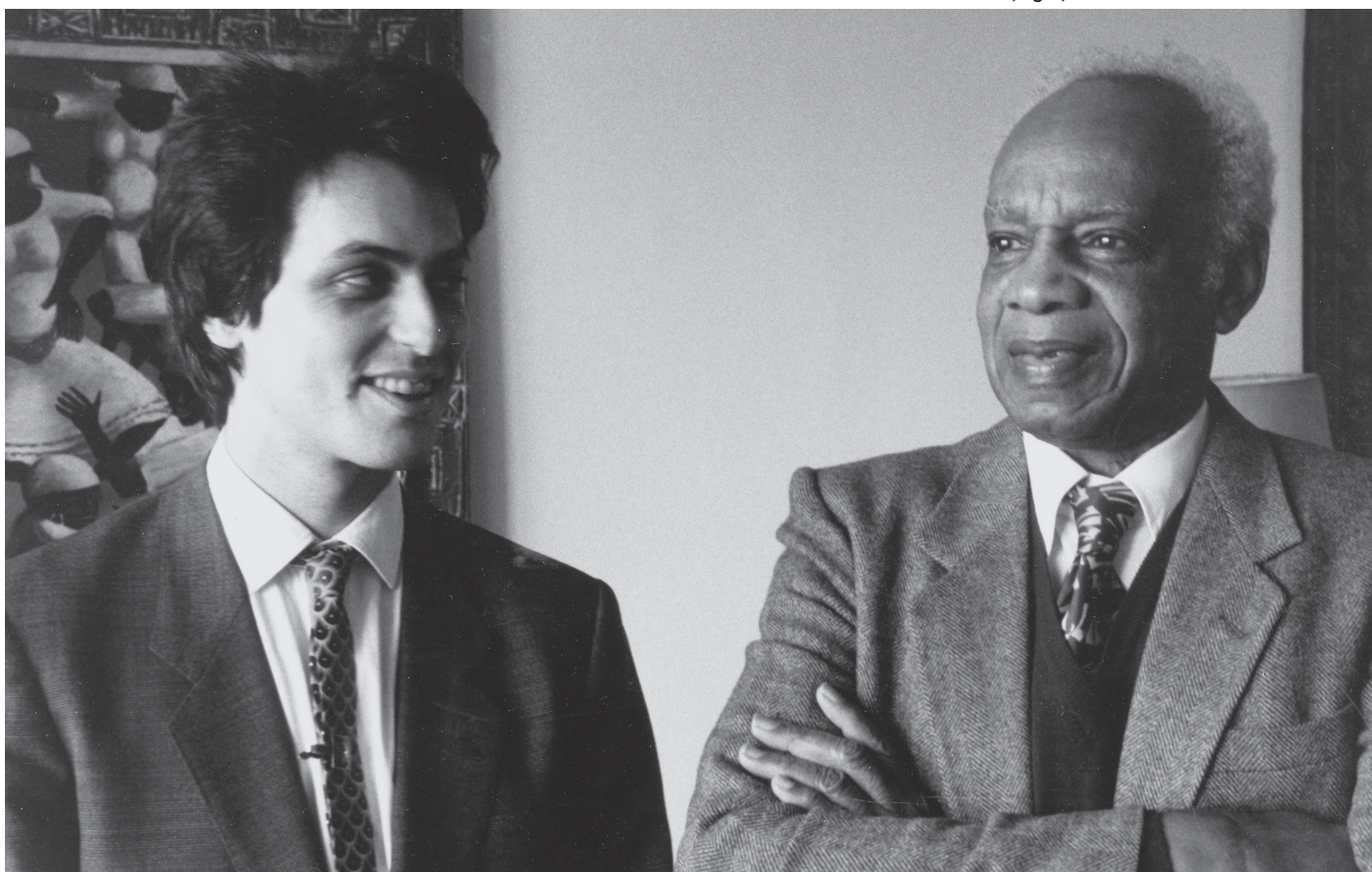
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Frantz Casseus, right, with his student Marc Ribot in 1987.



HARRIET RIBOT

Dance of the Hounsies

A miniature masterpiece by the “father of Haitian classical guitar”

BY MARC RIBOT

In 1965, Marc Ribot, then an 11-year-old aspiring rock musician, started taking classical guitar lessons from a close family friend, Frantz Casseus, who took inspiration from the folk forms of his native Haiti. Though in his professional life Ribot would go on to make quite dissimilar and beautifully off-center music, both on his own and with a range of collaborators—Tom Waits, Elvis Costello, Robert Plant and Alison Krauss, John Zorn, Marianne Faithful, and McCoy Tyner, to name a few—he would carry with him the formative concepts he gleaned from his time with Casseus. To preserve his mentor’s legacy, in 1993 Ribot released Marc Ribot Plays Solo Guitar Works of Frantz Casseus. Long out of print, the album has been reissued with bonus tracks recorded in 2020, in CD, digital, and, for the first time, vinyl formats. Here Ribot breaks down one of Casseus’ masterpieces.

—Adam Perlmutter

“Dance of the Hounsies” was written by Frantz Casseus (1915–1993), a Haitian guitarist/composer widely acknowledged as the “father of Haitian classical guitar.” Casseus began writing music in the 1940s, and was among the first Haitian composers who, perhaps influenced by the Negritude Black culture movement of poet/playwright Aimé Césaire, turned to the rich folk traditions of Haiti for inspiration.

In a 1989 interview with Ira Landgarten in *Frets* magazine, Casseus described his own artistic mission as follows: “I believe it is the artist’s function to render articulately and with beauty the soul of the land of his origin and also the world that he experiences. . . . As you may know, my work is considered an expression of the Haitian spirit. Yet, critics have stated (and this has been my hope) that it transcends regionalism and enters the realm of transnational art.”

As the relatively protected son of a civil servant, Casseus had to study in order to learn certain Haitian folk traditions. After dropping out of law school in Port-au-Prince to become a full-time guitarist, he made contact, as he told Landgarten, “with certain griots and people initiated in our culture. Thus strengthened, I overflowed with rhythms, forms, lyrics of my future compositions.”

Casseus, who in 1946 emigrated to New York City (where he met my aunt and uncle, Rhoda and Melvin Unger), was to maintain his commitment to the creation of uniquely Haitian classical guitar music throughout his life. In 1954, he recorded his magnum opus, the four-part “Haitian Suite,” available on the Smithsonian Folkways recording *Haitian Dances, Haitian Suite* and in score form in *Frantz Casseus: Guitar Works* (Chanterelle/Schott), which I coedited with the celebrated Italian classical guitarist Alberto Mesirca.



VODOU INSPIRATION

"Dance of the Hounsies" first appeared on Casseus' 1969 recording *Haitiana* on the Afro-Carib label, and is also now available on Smithsonian Folkways. "Hounsies" refers to the ritual dance of local Vodou initiates, but it's uncertain whether Casseus was responding to a ceremony he witnessed directly while on one of several return trips to Haiti in the 1960s, to a painting of Hounsie dancers by the great Haitian artist Xavier Amiama, or both.

The score here is excerpted from *Guitar Works*. The ostinato in "Dance of the Hounsies" is a variation of the Congolese-derived "kongo siye" rhythm, while the piece's sometimes dense harmonies and cluster voicings reference composers Heitor Villa-Lobos and Maurice Ravel, as well as 1960s modal jazz.

DANCE-LIKE OSTINATOS AND RICH TONAL COLORS

Technically, "Dance of the Hounsies" is straightforward. Given that its inspiration was the highly rhythmic drumming used in local Vodou ceremonies, it is meant to be played in time,

not romantically interpreted. In Frantz's own rendition, the quarter note is about 96 bpm.

In addition to Casseus' exploration of Haitian rhythms, "Dance of the Hounsies" shows his awareness of the tonal colors inherent in the nylon-string guitar, especially evident in the chord voicings with unison notes, like the E doubled on string 3, fret 9, and the open first string in bars 10–11. [If you do not read standard notation, see AcousticGuitar.com for a version that includes tablature. —Ed.]

Key to performing the piece is playing the ostinato—which is established in the first two bars and falls on the note E in various octaves throughout—with rhythmic precision and verve. Make sure that you can convincingly play these rhythms before delving into the piece; you might also try learning the downstemmed layer on its own before working through the up-stemmed notes, and then combining both parts.

It's also important to observe the dynamic markings throughout, and the crescendos and decrescendos, for a fully expressed performance. I will confess to sometimes exaggerating the

dynamics, particularly the *forte* at bar 45 [appropriate for this dramatic moment, the only one making use of all six strings and encompassing the greatest range, from the low open E to the tenth-fret D on string 1. —Ed.].

Although trained in composition and classical guitar repertoire and technique, Frantz Casseus had to contend during his lifetime with the racism of a white American classical establishment which mistook his referencing of folk sources for musical naivete—hence his initial association with the Folkways label. However, with more recent recordings by Alberto Mesirca (*Haitian Suite: The Music of Frantz Casseus*) and others, Casseus' brilliant but long-neglected work is beginning to find the transnational audience it deserves.

Marc Ribot is a NYC-based guitarist, composer, and recording artist. His literary debut, *Unstrung: Rants and Stories of a Noise Guitarist*, was released in 2021 by Akashic Books. marcribot.com

A version of "Dance of the Hounsies" with TAB is available at AcousticGuitar.com.

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Moderé et bien rythmé

③

p *f* *p* *cresc.*

7 *f* *decisif*

13 ③ *mp* *f*

19 *p* ④ -----

25 *f* ⑤ ----- **CVII**

31 **CVII** *p* **CVII** ⑤

37 ③ 1.



2.

43

f

CV

49

②

③

CVII

②

CV

55

CV

CVII

③

⑤

61

67

1.

73

2.

CVII

④

CVII

④

CVII

④

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⑤

79

harm.



True Independence

Developing facility and coordination in both the fretting and picking fingers

BY SEAN MCGOWAN

As guitarists, we sometimes experience frustration when we can't play a certain musical passage or song due to limitations in our technical ability—and for good reason. When you consider the amount of work involved in fingering a simple chord, playing a scale, or synchronizing both hands to articulate a fingerstyle piece, it's apparent how much control and independence you need to develop and facilitate in both hands for them to work together to create music.

In this Weekly Workout, we're going to take a deep dive into building independence among the fingers of both hands, with the intention of having control not only over finger movement and hand coordination, but also musical articulations such as short vs. long notes, sustained chords, and more.

All of these exercises can be played fingerstyle or with hybrid picking (flatpick and fingers). Start by playing these examples slowly and assuredly, and consider adding them to your daily warmup routine when you first pick up the guitar. A little investment in these will pay off the next time you learn a more challenging piece.

one finger per fret. Two fingers will then trade places, starting with the first and second fingers. As indicated in the tab, keep your fingers on the same frets, but switch strings (i.e., the first will move up to the fourth string, and the second will move down to the fifth). As these two fingers swap, the other two remain in place holding the strings down.

Work through the following variations, swapping the first and third fingers, the first and fourth, etc. Be patient, as you will definitely encounter some challenging moves,

Beginners' Tip #1

Make sure to stretch out the fingers of the fretting hand prior to playing through these examples, and take frequent breaks to avoid any fatigue or cramping in the hand.

WEEK ONE

Start the first week by focusing on your fretting hand. **Example 1** illustrates a finger-exchange exercise. Start in fifth position with the fingers spread out across the fifth to second strings,

Beginners' Tip #2

As you explore the pinch technique, try using your middle or ring fingers in place of or alternating along with your index finger.



WEEK 1

Example 1

Example 2

Example 3

*Keep each circled note held while lifting other fretting fingers.

WEEK 2

Example 4

Example 5

Example 6

Example 7

particularly as some of the fingers will need to skip over more than one string when they swap. Once you're comfortable with the initial moves, try playing the swapped notes as short as possible. You can pretend the strings are extremely hot to touch, so you'll pop the notes on and off, immediately releasing the pressure and resulting in a staccato sound. You don't need to bounce completely off the strings, just simply release the pressure in the fingers that are trading places, while the other two fingers stay down. This effect will create a musical contrast of staccato vs. legato.

Example 2 is a powerful finger-switching exercise that was a favorite of classical guitar

virtuoso Andrés Segovia. Pay close attention to the fingerings. Essentially, you'll be using different combinations in moving through a chromatic scale in octaves. In **Example 3**, you'll continue to explore the difference between short and long notes using only the fretting hand to control the duration. Start by sounding a Cmaj7 chord. Try to imagine each of the four notes as a vocal part—soprano, alto, tenor, and bass, top to bottom.

In the first measure, immediately after you pick the strings, keep your fourth finger (the soprano) held down on string 2, while the other three fingers release, as in Ex. 1. The idea is for one note to sustain and carry while the other three stop short, creating a sharp contrast. Continue this exercise, moving through the variations in the following measures. In each subsequent bar, a different finger will stay held down while the other three release, resulting in a staccato chord against a longer melody note. These types of independence exercises will do more to create control and dynamics in your guitar playing than practicing any scale or arpeggio type of exercise (although those are important, too.)

WEEK TWO

Now let's focus on the picking hand. We'll start off with a basic two-note pinch technique. Play the open C chord in **Example 4** using your thumb for the fifth-string C, while your index finger (or middle if you're using a pick) moves across strings 4, 3, and 2. This is an essential technique among folk and blues guitarists, as well as West African musicians. Listen to African guitarists or kora players—you'll be amazed at how much music they can create using only two fingers!

Example 5 incorporates the thumb alternating between the fifth and sixth strings. In both this and the previous example, the thumb is picking along with the index finger.

Beginners' Tip #3

To keep your rhythm strong and secure, try planting your picking-hand fingers on the correct strings, just prior to plucking them. This will ensure good tone and steady rhythm.

Beginners' Tip #4

Try playing through the bass line first before tackling the chords. Map out in advance which fingers you'll need to use to play both parts.

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Now let's try separating them, as shown in **Examples 6 and 7**. In **Example 8**, we're moving across the strings with the index finger while the thumb alternates between two notes in the bass, resulting in more of a Kentucky thumb-style sound. A musical effect that is fun to explore is a two-against-three pattern (**Example 9**). Here, the index finger is playing a quarter-note triplet rhythm against the steady bass. This will really help

strengthen your rhythmic acuity, in addition to establishing independence in the fingers.

You can also play scales and lines in double-stops, as shown in **Example 10**. This example illustrates a C major scale ascending in thirds, and then descending in tenths (an interval of a third plus an octave, featured prominently in The Beatles song "Blackbird"). Try exploring this technique the next time you take a solo or write a riff for an original song.

WEEK THREE

Now let's add more picking-hand fingers to the mix. **Example 11** shows a basic claw technique using the thumb along with the index, middle, and ring fingers to pick all four strings simultaneously. **Examples 12a–14c** illustrate a number of variations where the chord is now split, creating an effect somewhere in between constant strumming and arpeggiating a chord. In examples

Example 8

Example 9

Example 10

WEEK 3

Example 11

Example 12a

Example 12b

Example 12c

Example 13a

Example 13b

Example 14a

Example 14b

Example 14c

12a–c, a Cmaj7 chord is divided, with one note alternating with the three other notes, creating a 1:3 ratio. **Examples 13a–b** show two-note splits with a G13 chord, while the Dm9 chord in **Examples 14a–c** illustrates three-against-one variations. Try playing through a chord progression using this technique. You'll find that splitting up the notes

of a chord in various ways will add significant contrast and color to your rhythm playing.

WEEK FOUR

Now we're ready to put it all together and combine these techniques by playing through a Kansas City-style jump-blues riff, featuring a moving bassline with chord jabs on top

(**Example 15**). Try to make the chords as short as possible, using the staccato technique we explored in the first week with the fretting hand. This will be in contrast to a smooth-flowing quarter note bassline. Meanwhile, the thumb of the picking hand will propel the bass as the index, middle, and ring fingers take care of the chord jabs happening on the “ands” of the beats. **AC**

WEEK 4

Example 15

C9
x2134x

G \flat 13
1x234x

F13
1x234x

C9
x2134x

TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Here's a short excerpt of an original fingerstyle composition titled “August,” which demonstrates the pinch and claw techniques in a different musical context. Having practiced these independence exercises, you'll likely notice more fluency in the fretting hand fingers when playing the melody with regard to the contrast between short melodic pull-offs in the first two bars and the longer sustained notes in measures 3–5.

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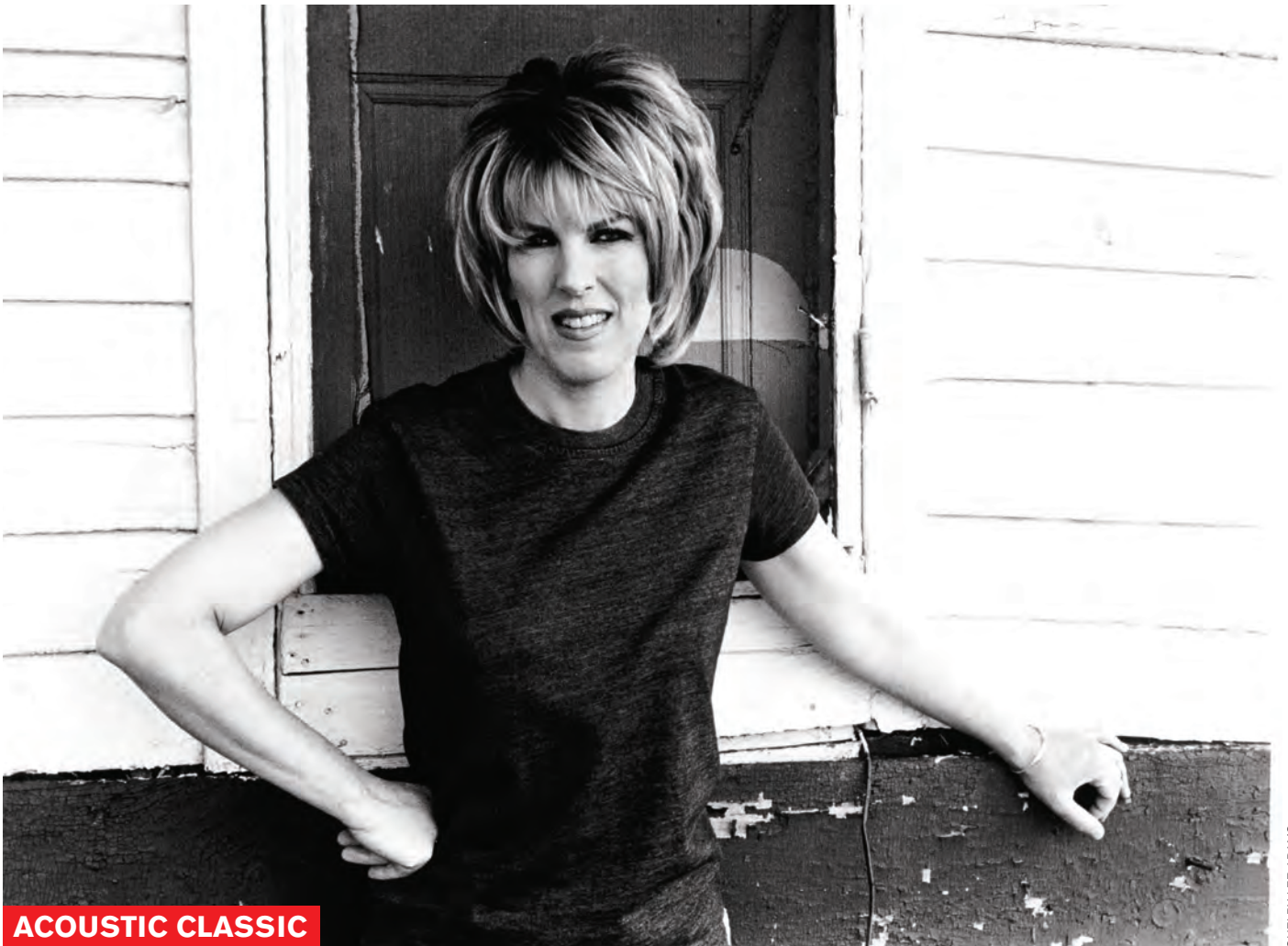
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ACOUSTIC CLASSIC

Passionate Kisses

Lucinda Williams' breakthrough song, by way of Mary Chapin Carpenter

BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS

In 1991, Lucinda Williams was touring Australia with Mary Chapin Carpenter and Rosanne Cash, and Carpenter fell in love with Williams' song "Passionate Kisses," playing and harmonizing with it at every show. Carpenter wound up covering the song on her album *Come On Come On* and releasing it as a single. Although her label did not see hit potential, the public felt otherwise: "Passionate Kisses" climbed the charts and won Grammys in 1994 for both Best Country Song and Best Country Vocal Performance.

The song, Williams says, is "the classic story of being with someone who's traveling a lot. It's really about loneliness and feeling like you want it

all—you want the passionate kisses and you want the security. In a way, it has a thing about creativity, too, because it says 'Pens that won't run out of ink/ And cool quiet and time to think.' So it's saying, I wish I had that in my life again instead of being in this tumultuous, crazy situation."

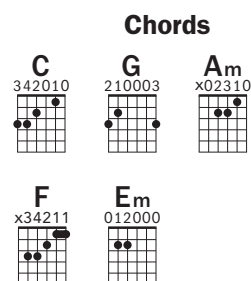
To play the rhythm part, capo at the fourth fret and use C shapes, which sound in the key of E major. The strum pattern shown is based on how Williams plays the song solo. She tends to play C as a C/G, and F as F/C, but for simplicity's sake, the chords are labeled simply as C and F.

On Williams' original record, Gurf Morlix played a ringing electric guitar hook that became

so central to the song that Mary Chapin Carpenter's guitarist John Jennings reproduced it almost exactly (though in a different key). Morlix's hook is shown here, played without a capo and therefore notated in the sounding key of E. Start all the way up at the 16th fret and play a descending melody on the third string against the top two strings ringing open.

Beyond the guitar hook, Carpenter's cover of "Passionate Kisses" is remarkably similar in sound and feel to Williams' original. The only differences are that Carpenter lowered the key a step (to capo 2) and added a short instrumental bridge that's included in the chart. **AC**

Capo IV



Strum Pattern

* ▢ = down; ▽ = up

Bonus Riff

No capo

Intro/Riff

C G Am F

C G

1. Is it too much to ask?

Am F

I want a comfortable bed that won't hurt my back

C G

Food to fill me up

Am F

And warm clothes and all that stuff

Pre-Chorus

C

Shouldn't I have this

Em

Shouldn't I have this

Am F

Shouldn't I have all of this and

Chorus

C F

Passionate kisses

C F

Passionate kisses, whoa

C F C

Passionate kisses from you

Repeat Riff

C G

2. Is it much to demand?

Am F

I want a full house and a rock and roll band

C G

Pens that won't run out of ink

Am F

And cool quiet and time to think

Repeat Pre-Chorus

Repeat Chorus

Repeat Riff x2 (Lucinda Williams version)

Bridge (Mary Chapin Carpenter version)

Dm7 G F

Dm E7 Am G G7

C G

3. Do I want too much?

Am F

Am I going overboard to want that touch?

C G

I shout it out to the night

Am F

Give me what I deserve, 'cause it's my right

Repeat Pre-Chorus

Repeat Chorus x2 (go to F between choruses)

Repeat Riff x2

Salt Creek

Playing up the neck
on an old favorite

BY ALAN BARNOSKY

A common question advancing flatpickers have is how and when to play up the neck. In genres like blues, rock, and jazz, the answers are somewhat intuitive because those styles primarily use closed shapes that feel natural to move around. But in acoustic flatpicking, things are a bit more nuanced. The essence of flatpicking is rooted in the open position, so moving up the neck must be done in a way that doesn't betray that sound. I like to think of up-the-neck passages as brief departures that typically start and end in open position. The previous two Pickin' columns give nice examples of these types of passages. In this lesson, you'll look more deeply into another.

"Salt Creek" is an old favorite tune that can be heard at any bluegrass jam. The arrangement through bar 17 shows how this tune is commonly played on guitar. It utilizes open strings, slides, and slurs, and the B section requires a substantial fretting-hand stretch. This arrangement is mostly based out of open position, and as such it has that classic flatpicking sound.

I've also included an alternate way to play the B section in a closed, up-the-neck position that avoids the fourth-finger stretch. This is nearly the exact same melody, but in a higher position it takes on a different quality. It has a warmer tone, and playing across three strings offers more connectedness between melody notes compared to



KENDALL BAILEY PHOTOGRAPHY

mostly moving along the first string. The only difference is the added D at the end of the second and sixth bars, a drone note that can be sustained underneath the following passage and can't easily be done in the lower register. This alternate approach isn't necessarily better sounding or easier to play—it offers its own set of advantages and challenges, and it's up to each player to decide which approach they prefer.

Notice how the last measure uses the open second string to leave the closed position and drop back down the neck. This "escape note" is critical when moving along the neck so that there are not audible gaps when changing positions. One other point worth mentioning: when playing with a band, a guitarist usually needs to

start playing rhythm immediately after their solo. Dropping back down to open position at the end of the passage helps create a seamless transition into accompaniment mode.

Try both versions of the B section and see which one works best for you. Even if you end up choosing the first approach, learning the alternate can help with understanding the neck a little better. If you wish to explore the fretboard even more, try working out the A section—or another fiddle tune you may know—in a closed position. You'll probably find that playing a whole tune in that manner doesn't sound the best, but maybe a brief passage up the neck is the exact thing a piece needs in order to reach its full potential. **AC**

SALT CREEK

TRADITIONAL

Capo II

A

G C F D

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5

G C F

1. D G 2. D G

10

G F

14

G F D G

Alternate B Section

G F D

G F D G



What'll I Do

An unlikely song makes for a satisfying but easy arrangement

KATE KOENIG

You wouldn't normally think of the work of the great American songwriter Irving Berlin as campfire fare, but in this installment, Berlin's "What'll I Do" takes the spotlight—in an arrangement that'll have you wondering why you've never played it around a campfire. Written in 1923, "What'll I Do" is one of many Berlin hits, with others including "White Christmas," "Puttin' on the Ritz," and "Anything You Can Do (I Can Do Better)."

"What'll I Do" is said to have been inspired by Berlin's personal life: After meeting Ellin Mackay, the daughter of successful financier Clarence Mackay, at a dinner party, the two fell in love. But the elder Mackay was disapproving of Berlin, and had his daughter sent on tour to Europe in order to separate them. The song was

then written during their time apart. Against her father's wishes, they did eventually elope in 1926, and remained together until her death in 1988.

Over the course of the 20th century, "What'll I Do" has been covered by countless artists—to name just a few, Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland, Chet Baker, Linda Ronstadt, and Willie Nelson. It's also been featured in film and television, including the 1974 version of *The Great Gatsby*, *Golden Girls* (sung by Bea Arthur), and *Mad Men*.

Featuring mostly open chords in first position, "What'll I Do" follows a sort of I–iv–V pattern during the verse, alternating between C, Fm, and G. To make things a bit more interesting, a Gaug chord introduces the form, then later is used as a transition between the first

and second verse. Though you might be unfamiliar with the chord, it is easy to play, as it's simply a G chord with a D# (the augmented fifth) added on the fourth string.

Meanwhile, for the barre chords featured in the song (F and Fm), singer-songwriter Maurice Tani offers two fingering options—you can either play them with the traditional barre, or wrap your thumb around to play the root on the low E string, as shown in the notation. Once you get a hang of these chord shapes, "What'll I Do" is sure to make a colorful addition to your campfire repertoire.

AG



Maurice Tani

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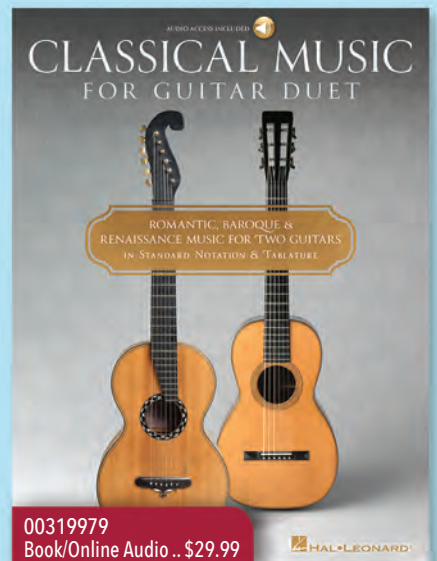
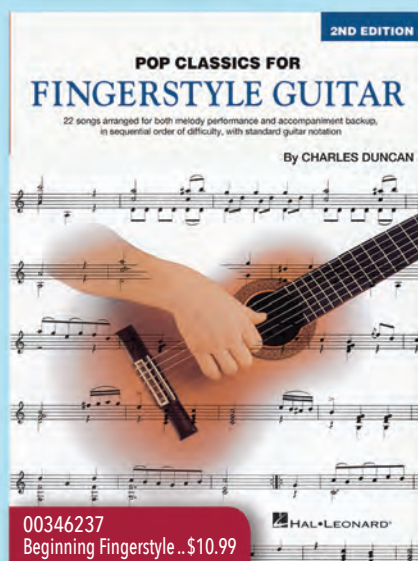
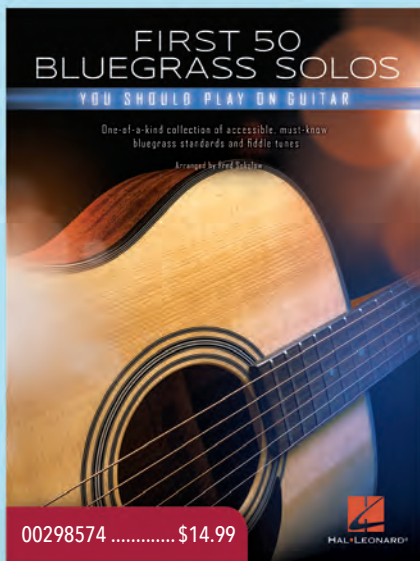
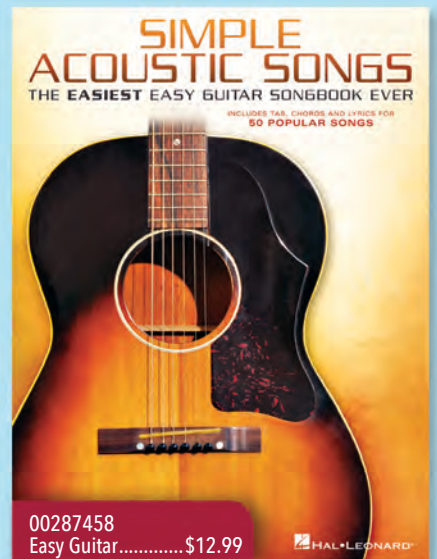
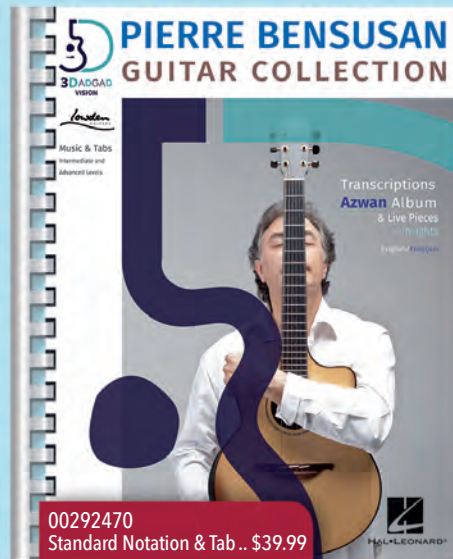
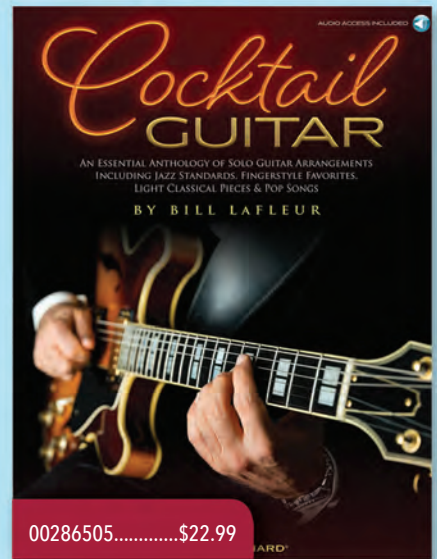
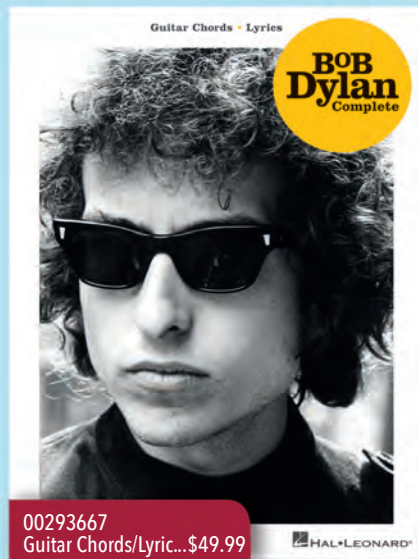
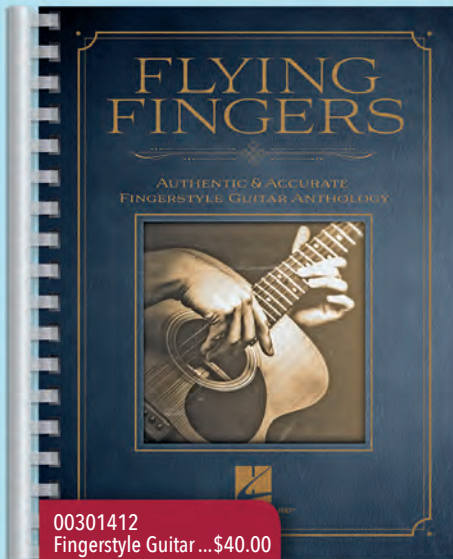


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Chord diagrams: **Gaug** (321004), **C** (x32010), **Fm** (T34111), **C** (x32010).

What - 'll I do when you _____ are far a -

Chord diagrams: **Fm** (T34111), **C** (x32010), **G** (320004), **C** (x32010), **Gaug** (321004).

way and I am blue? What - 'll I do? What - 'll I

Chord diagrams: **C** (x32010), **Fm** (T34111), **C** (x32010), **Fm** (T34111).

do _____ when I am won - der - ing who's



15 **C** x32010 **G** 320004 **C** x32010 **C7** x32410

kiss - ing you? What - 'll I do? What - 'll I

19 **F** T34211 **Dm7** xx0211 **F** T34211 **Fm** T34111

do _____ with just _____ a pho - to - graph to

23 **C** x32010 **A7** x02030 **D7** xx0213 **G7** 320001

tell my trou - bles _____ to? _____ When I'm a -

27 **C** x32010 **Fm** T34111 **C** x32010 **Fm** T34111

lone _____ with on - ly dreams of you that

31 **C** x32010 **G** 320004 **C** x32010

won't come true, what - 'll I do?



COURTESY OF GIBSON

MAKERS & SHAKERS

American Icons

How James “JC” Curleigh is using lessons from Levi’s to spur Gibson revival

BY EMILE MENASCHÉ

James “JC” Curleigh was no stranger to famous labels when he found himself at the helm of one of the music industry’s most iconic—and troubled—brands in the fall of 2018. But he was new to the musical instrument industry, on a professional level at least.

Yet, after helping to make the iconic American brand Levi Strauss & Company “cool again” (in the words of *Harvard Business Review*), Curleigh thought he understood why one of the world’s biggest stringed instrument makers had lost its way—and how to get it on the right path. “I was sitting there at Levi’s,” says Curleigh, now Gibson’s president and CEO, “and I thought: ‘I’ve got a playbook of how to restore originality back to an iconic brand, but at the same time, move it forward to the next generation.’ At Levi’s, we had what I would call the ‘blueprint’ we put into play over six or seven years. And it really worked—for all the right reasons.”

Though Levi’s was formed decades earlier than Gibson (1853 vs. 1894), both companies became iconic in the middle of the 20th century. Both would become cultural symbols beyond their core industries—and both would suffer decline as fashions changed, production methods evolved, competition went global, and corporate practices transformed.

Gibson spent decades as an industry leader—especially during the Lloyd Loar and Ted McCarty eras. It bought and subsumed one of its chief rivals, Epiphone, in 1957 (eventually making it an import brand) and introduced some of its most innovative instruments in the 1960s. But then, like other giants of the American musical instrument industry, Gibson was swallowed up by a conglomerate. It took a little more than a decade for the Norlin Corporation to send Gibson to the brink of extinction.

Beginning in 1986, a rescue effort led by Henry E. Juszkwiewicz kept Gibson in business

and brought a range of new and revived instruments. But not all was sunbursts and unicorns. Critics argued that under Juszkwiewicz, Gibson had overreached by buying up tech brands (and mismanaging them). Meanwhile, the sheer number of models and configurations confused some buyers. And by 2010, federal officials were accusing the company of illegally importing endangered woods (eventually settled with a \$300,000 fine).

The ship was drifting toward disaster; it hit the proverbial iceberg in 2018, as the Gibson Guitar Corporation filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. That’s when Curleigh reached out to the administrators to share some strategies from his Levi’s blueprint. But as he explained during a long phone interview this spring, he had no idea it would lead to him writing a new playbook for Gibson—or weathering the COVID crisis while trying to restore the credibility of a wounded giant.

How does a guy go from brand president at Levi's to leading Gibson?

It took an unfortunate circumstance to create a fortunate circumstance for me. I reached out to the team that was taking Gibson through the obstacle course of bankruptcy and said, "How can I help?"

I thought I could just meet with and advise them. Fast forward a few months after the first conversation, and they asked me to be the CEO. I had one of those moments of like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, I didn't see that coming!" But then I thought, "I can really lead an iconic brand back, hopefully restore its status, and at the same time meet a massive passion in my life." The two came together. It wasn't a question of if Gibson was going to come back, but of when and how. And that's what we're working on now.

What attracted you to the job?

I think it's a balance of passion and professionalism. I was really fortunate to grow up in a musical family. My dad was a Navy helicopter pilot; my mom, a free spirit from Nova Scotia, Canada. And their common denominator was music and bluegrass festivals. My dad played banjo and my mom played guitar.

We grew up in that sort of world where we were always having access to music. And then I chose a professional course of President and CEO of [sporting goods company] Solomon, North America, and then CEO of [outdoor apparel company] Keene, before becoming brand president at Levi's. I had always pursued jobs reflecting my own passions. I was a big skier and I love the outdoors and I grew up wearing Levi's. But I never really contemplated the intersection of my career and my true passion, which is music, until Gibson.

Compared to blue jeans, musical instruments is a niche industry—with more expensive products that are purchased less frequently. How do you transfer successful practices from one to the other?

What I often say to the team—and I really believe this—is: As leaders, none of us can guarantee success in the future. But what we can guarantee is we can set better conditions for success. And I recognized very early on that those conditions for success were not set at Gibson. I literally read thousands and thousands of pieces of insight and information, social media posts, etc., before I even started. And I recognized that the answer was literally right in front of us.

[The turnaround was possible] if Gibson could shed itself of all the distractions, refocus on quality, and leverage and understand its

iconic past. But at the same time, we had to think about what's next [and find] that balance of how to be original [traditional] in our essence but also modern in our approach.

What was the biggest stumbling block?

Attention to quality was number one. I said, "Let's make fewer guitars—but improve quality." Every guitar that's gone out under the new leadership has our fingerprints on it. We've also put a lot of attention on the Custom Shop both for electrics here in Nashville and an acoustic custom shop in Bozeman, Montana. We're making sure we have the right balance of craftsmanship and automation to deliver the quality people expect.

In the past, some reviewers, myself included, found Gibsons to be inconsistent coming out of the case. You'd have a very handsome and very expensive guitar with a lousy setup or jagged fret edges.

We took several actions. And this might sound like a relatively boring list, but the first thing we

'It wasn't a question of if Gibson was going to come back but of when and how'

—JAMES "JC" CURLEIGH

did was declare a war on dust. Our number-one issue with quality was what we call trash on the guitar—dust particles that get embedded in the nitrocellulose [lacquer finish]. Second, we looked at the number of times we were touching our guitars before they left the factory. Every time you touch a guitar, it's prone to some type of "quality incident." We reduced the number of touches by half.

And we also set up a much more linear approach to guitar building so that each individual along the [production] line is responsible for handing off the high-quality guitar to the next person. We didn't wait until the end to see what was wrong with it. By the time we do final a multi-point inspection and it's set up to play, the chances of delivering a high-quality guitar with a perfect setup goes up significantly.

We've seen our quality issues decline. And quite frankly, our loyalty factor has increased

as a result of better guitars out of the box. Because that's really what people buy into with Gibson. It's the quality of the sound, of the craftsmanship, of the wood—the attention to detail.

I've heard you refer to "original" instruments. What do you mean?

I think over time the company got really confused about what was original [to a particular model]. And then they'd try this innovation that wouldn't work. And they would then put everything into that innovation. And it was like it had to be an either/or choice: Should we be original? Or modern?

I believe we can and should be both. Gibson was always known for innovation. But if you don't go back to your original, historic, authentic past to look into the origins of those ideas and why they were successful in the first place, you can't just go forward.

If Gibson is the premium brand, Epiphone is the entry level for a lot of players. Are you changing the way the two will function together?

We've paid a lot of attention to the connection between Gibson and Epiphone. I think Epiphone was sort of the distant stepchild. By the way, there's a history lesson in all this:

Epiphone is not the little brother, it's the older brother. Epiphone started in 1873; Gibson in 1894. In its heyday, Epiphone was absolutely a premium brand. Somewhere along the journey, [Gibson leadership] sort of put it into a different position.

And so now we look at Epiphone as an aspirational, authentic brand as well. You can get into an amazing Epiphone Inspired by Gibson for \$400—then you can go all the way up to a custom shop Epiphone. And we're going to do the same on the acoustic guitars: with Epiphone Inspired by Gibson [import] models and, at the same time, made-in-the-USA Epiphones.

When you took over, Gibson had a number of non-guitar brands on its books, like Cerwin Vega and Oberheim. When you returned the Oberheim brand name and IP to Tom Oberheim in 2019, you called it a "gesture of good will." How did that help beyond good karma?

I'm really proud of how we handled that. We made sure we put those back in the right homes. That opened the way for us to really focus our attention, investment, and priorities on Gibson, Epiphone, and Kramer, which is also making an amazing comeback. Then the next step—really in parallel—that was to reengage with the artists.

Why do you say reengage?

By and large, artists have always loved Gibson as a brand and as a guitar—but they haven't necessarily liked the company. And now, I think it's very safe to say that our relationship with artists has never been stronger. We're engaging the artist community, not only for signature models but also for new ideas and for our new platform with Gibson TV. They were instrumental—pun intended—in helping us create the Gibson app.

Also, the Gibson Gives Foundation is supporting a lot of artists through [the GRAMMY Foundation's] MusiCares. We're setting up emerging artist programs. We also really reengaged with the industry and with dealers. Similar to artists, I think we were not easy to work with as a company. And now, I don't think any company is perfect, but we've certainly made progress in our partnerships with dealers. Those [steps] sound simple, but they're not easy ones to accomplish.

How has the COVID crisis affected your progress?

A year ago [spring of 2020], we were only a year and a half out of bankruptcy. We had all this momentum coming out of NAMM and the NAB—and then the emergency brake got pulled. COVID hit and our factories were shut, dealers were shut, and we were like, "Now what?"

We said, "Let's plan for some impact here—but let's also keep preparing for opportunity." That allowed us to really think about the future through a strategic long-term lens. We started thinking about the Gibson app. We planned the Gibson Garage, which is an 8,000-square-foot facility here in Nashville, and we're investing in all of our factories.

We're doubling the size of our acoustic factory in Bozeman; construction is currently underway. We're getting our qualified craftsmen and craftswomen all lined up. And it's really going to be the balance between modern automation and the work of talented people.

We talked about the challenges of COVID—have there been any positives?

Let's assume there's a post-COVID world where there was a real surge in guitar playing because people had more time—from beginners to intermediates all the way up to advanced players. In a way, the COVID crisis also turned into the sort of COVID creative opportunity for individuals and for the music industry. How do we as an industry take advantage of this surge in music and guitar playing. How do we keep that going?

We hear these statistics like, "eight out of ten people try it, but give up after one year." Well,



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once you learn three or five chords in ten songs, you're a guitar player—you keep playing. So I think our single biggest challenge as a guitar community is how to foster the energy and the excitement and the lifelong journey of playing guitar.

You mentioned rebuilding artist relations. Are you still doing signature models?

We recently launched the Sheryl Crow Country Western, the Orianthi J-200, and the Tom Petty Wildflower J-200, which is unbelievable. Also, when we started working with Slash, we realized that there's an acoustic opportunity. So we launched the Slash acoustic collection about a year ago as well.

In the past, guitarmakers seemed to focus most of their marketing on male players. Are you making more of an effort to reach women?

Yes. Whether it's in sports, in fashion, or in music—if you go to a live event, the crowd is really balanced between men and women. So why isn't that reflected in our efforts to connect with those musicians who either already play or who want to play?

Gibson was always one of the few brands with a presence across all genres of popular music—jazz, rock, country & western. And we have a pretty strong track record with the women of music: Emmylou Harris, Lizzy Hale of Halestorm, Sheryl Crow as I mentioned. Taylor Swift showed up at the Grammys playing a Gibson; Brandi Carlile played a Gibson at the John Prine tribute concert.

The acoustic room at the Gibson Garage in Nashville

What about attracting younger players?

I think that's our next challenge: What do we do for the next generation? There are three things that we're putting in motion: One is a platform called 3G: The Gibson Generation Group. We invite musicians from around the world between the ages of ten and 18 to apply. If we select them, they're in our program for two years and we support them with instruments, mentoring, and connections to the music community. It's well underway and has a really good balance of boys and girls from Europe, Asia, and the Americas.

Second is our modern instrument collection. We're taking ideas from what younger players want—maybe lighter weight or an easier way to learn to play. And third is specifically in the acoustic market, trying to make sure that our next generation of instruments includes models in a price range that's more accessible to younger players.

Do you have a favorite Gibson?

I'm an acoustic guy, and my favorite is the J-45. But I grew up playing an Epiphone acoustic. That's my mom's influence. My mom wore Levi's jeans and played an Epiphone all her life. Her dream was one day to own a Gibson. And so now today, you know, [my mother] Nancy has her trusty Epiphone that she's had for 50 years and she's got a Gibson with her initials on the truss rod cover from me. That was a proud moment for me—to make my mom's Gibson dream come true, 50 years later. **AC**

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Hard Reset

Fixing problems caused by incorrect neck angles on steel-string guitars

BY MARTIN KEITH

Q: I recently bought a used guitar and took it to my tech for a setup (the action was too low). He put a ruler on the frets, took one measurement, and told me that it would be at least \$400 to get it to play right. What's going on? The guitar looks brand-new. —Amy Wilson, via email

A: Funny you should ask—I've had nearly the same situation come through my shop twice in the last month. It's a reminder of the potential pitfalls of buying any guitar without a warranty. Sometimes, even expensive name-brand guitars can suffer from errors of geometry that make them almost impossible to set up correctly. It sounds like your guitar is suffering from the same unfortunate issue that my clients' guitars exhibited: an "over-set" neck angle. Let's discuss what that is, how it can happen, and why it's such a problematic issue.

Nearly all flattop acoustic guitars have their necks attached at a slight angle. A quick look at the guitar illustrates why this is necessary—the fretboard is only about 1/4-inch thick where it joins the body, but the bridge is usually 3/8-inch or so above the top. Additionally, many guitars have domed tops, which further elevate the bridge. To keep the string action reasonable, the neck must be pitched back a little, so the strings get gradually higher above the top as they travel towards the bridge.

Neck angle is probably the single most crucial variable for the playability of a flattop guitar. If it is too shallow, the action will never be low enough to be comfortable, unless the bridge gets shaved down to a fraction of its ideal thickness. This was a common approach

On a well-set neck the plane of the fret tops should line up closely with the top of the bridge.



BILL EVANS

in years past, as a way of avoiding the cost of a full neck reset. However, lowering the bridge causes problems of its own: It reduces the torque/twisting pressure of the strings on the top, which robs the instrument of responsiveness and volume. It also reduces the bridge's structural contribution to the top, which makes future failures more likely.

Shallow neck angles like this are very common and have been accepted as a fact of life for vintage guitars. The process of resetting the neck angle by removing the neck and recutting the joint has become widely accepted, and when done well, it can be invisible, stable, and as beneficial to a guitar's market value as it is to its playability. Less common is the situation we're faced with here—an instrument where the factory neck angle is too steep. In these

cases, the bridge and saddle must be comically high to get the action in a reasonable range. In the worst case I've seen, the bridge/saddle would have needed to be almost as tall as an archtop bridge in order to play properly—about 3/4-inch!

So what is to be done with such instruments? Can you simply put extra-tall bridge saddles on them? This can work as a short-term solution, but you should expect contrasting side effects to those caused by bridges that are too low: The torque/twist on the top will be dramatically increased by overly high bridges, and this can easily result in excessive top distortion, loose braces, cracked bridge plates, and bridges becoming cracked or unglued. Most guitar bracing patterns are designed for a certain amount of stress and will



Martin Keith

GOT A QUESTION?

Uncertain about guitar care and maintenance? The ins-and-outs of guitar building? Or another topic related to your gear? Ask *Acoustic Guitar's* repair expert Martin Keith by sending an email titled "Repair Expert" to Editors.AG@stringletter.com and we'll forward it to Keith.



If AG selects your question for publication, you'll receive a complimentary copy of AG's *Acoustic Guitar Owner's Manual*.

fail quickly if subjected to excessive tension. Even if the guitar manages to hold together, most luthiers agree that an overloaded top will sound choked, compressed, and unmusical. In cases where I've simply had to get such an instrument playing without a big investment, I've suggested that the player use extra light (.010 or .011 gauge) strings to give the guitar half a chance of surviving the extra load.

How about a neck reset—can a luthier just lower the neck angle? Unfortunately, this is not as simple as it may sound. In a typical reset, the luthier will carefully shave away wood from the heel of the neck, and usually add a thin, tapered shim under the fretboard extension to keep it in plane with the rest of the neck. However, correcting an overset neck would require the opposite: adding wood at the base of the heel, and planing away wood from under the fretboard extension. Though technically possible, this would be vastly more complicated to touch up cosmetically, and the resulting tapered fretboard extension would be nearly impossible to detail in a way that looked normal.

My usual approach in these cases is to do the least invasive thing possible to make the guitar play adequately, inform the client fully about the reasons underlying the issues, and refer them to warranty support if it is an option. I usually also need to run them through a quick

Neck angle is probably the single most crucial variable for the playability of a flattop guitar.

primer on how to spot some of the structural issues that may arise from keeping an overset guitar under tension. And though I don't usually prefer bridge support systems, I might consider adding one in an extreme case where the overly tall bridge presented an existential threat to the top.

All of this serves to remind that neck angle should be on everyone's checklist when evaluating a guitar for purchase, whether new or used. Both of the cases that came through my shop were overset at the factory, and both were made by well-regarded companies.

If buying in person, a simple glance down the neck can sometimes be enough, but better still is to bring a 24-inch ruler and lay it on the frets (making sure to avoid the nut). The plane of the fret tops should line up quite closely with the top of the bridge (not the saddle, but the wooden bridge itself). If it is much lower, the guitar likely needs a reset. If it's much higher, it might be difficult to get the action into a playable range without some real heroics.

Buying online, I'd consider it both reasonable and advisable to request photos from the seller which show this ruler-and-bridge measurement, and many of the better online dealers of vintage guitars have already begun to include such photos in their listings. This can go a long way toward avoiding some big disappointments down the road. **AC**

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Collings CJ-45 T

The Austin-based maker unveils an exceptional new model that stands apart

BY GREG OLWELL

Sometimes when you pick up a steel-string, you know immediately that you're holding an extraordinary instrument—a guitar that just seems to vibrate excellence even before you play your first note. I've had that feeling with a handful of vintage instruments and a few new ones over years of playing and geeking out, and each left a lasting impression. The new Collings CJ-45 T is one that I'm going to remember long after I reluctantly return it to its builders. It radiated excellence from the moment I opened the case, beheld the guitar's beautiful sunburst finish, and wrapped my hand around its ample neck. With this new addition to Collings' Traditional series, the Austin-based guitar maker reconsidered its slope-shouldered dreadnought and delivered a new instrument that shows how much can be achieved with a mix of CNC manufacturing, handcrafting, and vision.

A NOD TO HISTORY

Collings' CJ series is inspired by the slope-shouldered designs unveiled in the mid-1930s in response to the introduction of Martin's dreadnought at the beginning of that decade. While the Collings CJ-45 T is not an attempt to re-create one particular vintage instrument, it channels several distinctive features of early slope-shouldered models and funnels them through Collings' meticulous attention to materials, construction, and finishing, while adding plenty of new touches and ideas. The result is a guitar that stands apart from anything else Collings currently offers.

The company's Traditional series uses select woods, different internal construction, and a thin nitrocellulose finish, among other specs, to accentuate midrange fundamentals and clear trebles in a guitar that has a more broken-in feel than those in Collings' standard series. The CJ-45 T has a Sitka spruce top with Sitka spruce bracing (and uses two scalloped tone bars), tall and thin bracing on the Honduran mahogany back and sides, a large wartime neck carve, and Collings' exceptional finishing and setup.

The neck's large, round shape and 1-3/4-inch-wide nut are meant to capture the



PHOTOS COURTESY OF COLLINGS GUITARS/ALEX RUEB



meaty profile of prized prewar guitars. In this age of vintage-correct shapes, the CJ-45 T's neck stands out with a nearly one-inch thickness at the first fret, and for some players, its robust shape may be a "love me or leave me" feature. I can't think of another new guitar that felt so made for my hands, and I'm crazy for it, so count me in the "love me" crowd. It felt like the best of a substantial vintage neck, but with all the benefits of a brand-new guitar—like a functional truss rod, exceptional fretwork, and no capo damage on the back of the neck.

EXCEPTIONAL OLD-TIMEY SOUND

The CJ-45 T's features all add up to a guitar with robust and defined bass, clear trebles, and a thick midrange that exudes warmth when flatpicked or fingerpicked. Though my tester was (naturally) brand-new, from its first notes it had an old-timey sound that was exceptionally rich with fundamentals and dreadnought warmth. And the tone only improved over the weeks I played it. Each chord's notes rang clearly, and they worked so well together that I just wanted to play in C

and G all day long. But as delightful as playing cowboy chords was for me, this guitar can definitely handle much more, from the punch and bounce of swing comping to fluid Tony Rice-inspired solo lines.

Dynamically, the CJ-45 T felt like it had an enormous amount of headroom on tap, ably handling the hard-hit notes with as much clarity, definition, punch, and warmth (there's that word again) as the delicately subtle notes. This gave solos tremendous expressiveness along with the ability to just keep getting louder without compressing. As a short-scale dreadnought with a wide neck, the CJ-45 T is a great vehicle for fingerpicking. Playing it solo, I treasured its definition, clarity, and dynamic ability in standard and open tunings. It's the sort of guitar that not only makes everything sound better but also feel better.

ON THE GIG

I took the CJ-45 T to a gig where a few other guitarists checked it out. While players and audience members agreed that the guitar sounded good flatpicked and fingerpicked, its neck carve was polarizing among the guitarists. The ragtime

fingerpicker loved the picking- and fretting-hand spacing and the neck's full, hand-supporting shape as he worked up and down the neck. Next, we passed it to a hot bluegrass picker. We jammed on "Lost Indian" as I accompanied him on a vintage Gibson L-5, and his solos on the Collings showed off its ability to produce powerful lows and singing woody highs, along with a volume that had no trouble flying over the rhythm guitar. A third player quickly decided that the neck shape was not for him, despite appreciating the tone and workmanship.

While dreadnoughts often leave me wanting something more tonally balanced and physically comfortable to play, the neck and the depth and warmth of the Collings CJ-45 T captivated me. I could—and did—play this guitar for hours without feeling uncomfortable. After hearing it fingerpicked and flatpicked by other players, I know I wouldn't tire of listening to its expressive sounds, either. At \$6,400, the CJ-45 T has an entry fee that will keep it out of the hands of many players, but it rewards listeners and players with a singularly satisfying sound. And it sure looks good.

AG

SPECS

BODY 14-fret slope-shouldered dreadnought shape; Sitka spruce top with scalloped Sitka spruce braces; solid Honduran mahogany back and sides; ebony straight bridge with bone cut-through saddle and 2-5/16" spacing; ivoroid plastic binding, bridge pins, and endpin; tortoise pattern pickguard; high-gloss nitrocellulose lacquer finish

NECK 24-7/8"-scale Honduran mahogany with CJ-45 wartime neck carve; adjustable truss rod; mortise-and-tenon hybrid neck joint; 19 nickel-silver frets; Indian rosewood fingerboard with 12" radius and mother-of-pearl long-dot pattern fingerboard inlay; 1-3/4" bone nut; haircut headstock shape with ebony overlay and mother-of-pearl logo

OTHER Waverly nickel 16:1 tuners with ivoroid buttons; D'Addario EJ17 strings (.013–.056); deluxe TKL/Collings hardshell case; left-handed available

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Cort Gold-Edge

Vintage meets modern boutique in an affordable new acoustic-electric

BY KATE KOENIG

Founded in 1973, South Korean manufacturer Cort Guitars isn't your typical brand. The company was once famously known for its low-cost copies of classic American guitars. But in recent years, Cort's offerings have come to adopt a more distinctive style, borrowing features from high-end boutique instruments—while still remaining affordable. The Gold-Edge, which was introduced as a limited edition at the 2020 Winter NAMM show and has now been launched as a regular production model, is a good example of the modern Cort aesthetic. This lovely grand auditorium with Venetian cutaway and L.R. Baggs electronics stands out as an instrument designed with vintage feel and sound.

HANDSOMELY DESIGNED

The Gold-Edge comes in a classy brown hard-shell case with gold latches and plush burgundy lining. My first impression upon holding the guitar was that it seemed like it would fit in perfectly in an old-fashioned study, among classic books and luxurious furniture. That's not at all to say that it seems antiquated, but rather that it has that kind of distinguished character.

This model has a torrefied solid Sitka spruce top with traditional scalloped X-bracing, solid flamed myrtlewood back and sides, a walnut-reinforced mahogany neck, and an ebony fretboard and bridge pins. The top, back, and sides have a glossy UV finish that's about 30 percent thinner than standard polyurethane and allows the wood to breathe more freely.

Aside from the vintage feel, the Gold-Edge's most distinctive feature is its triple bevel cut, where the armrest, cutaway, and ribrest are each rounded with a jet-black bevel. The color



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CORT GUITARS



of the bevels and the surrounding black binding contributes to the overall contrast between the sepia-toned back and sides and the blonder spruce top, but most importantly, these features make the guitar comfortable to hold and play. The warm contrast is further embellished by the russet mahogany neck and the black front of the headstock. Vintage Grover tuners with black buttons and golden mechanisms complete the elegant look.

PLENTIFUL OVERTONES

The Gold-Edge has a surprisingly bold sound, with a rich low end and midrange. Its tone is crisp, and you can hear each string individually when playing chords. Taking a pick to the guitar yields powerful results. Open chords are full and colorful, while those played with fretted notes ringing against the open top two strings show off the instrument's expansive sonic palette. Fingerpicking, on the other hand, is less satisfying—as a well-made instrument, the guitar produces reliably resonant sounds, but more delicate playing seems to get somewhat lost in the high end.

That being said, as you visit each fret moving up the fingerboard, you can hear plentiful overtones ringing out. The E strings in particular sing for several seconds after being played, while the fretboard is especially hot in the midrange, between the fifth and ninth frets on the G, D, and A strings. This makes playing higher up the neck in that range that much more effective and inviting.

Francisco Tárrega's "Marieta Mazurka" is a good example of a piece that particularly suits this guitar, as it climbs higher up the neck to the midrange and just above it.

The model I reviewed had comfortable action—just close enough to the fretboard to make it easy on my fretting hand, but without

The Gold-Edge has a surprisingly bold sound, with a rich low end and midrange.

buzzing. And the neck's satin finish made it perfect for sliding up and down, as did its slender shape. Mimicking boutique acoustic builders, Cort used a complex method to round the edges of the Gold-Edge's frets—an aspect that ends up making a subtle difference to an effortlessly playable neck.

FLEXIBLE ELECTRONICS

The Gold-Edge comes equipped with an L.R. Baggs Anthem pickup, which is designed with a combination of an Element undersaddle pickup and Baggs's patented Tru-Mic microphone, located right under the bridge. Placed under the top edge of the soundhole, the preamp allows you to adjust volume, phase, and the mix between the undersaddle pickup and the microphone. There's also a handy button that allows you to check the battery life.

Plugged into my Roland CUBE Street EX, I found that the clarity from both pickups is excellent. I really liked the tone with the wheel turned all the way to the Element undersaddle side, but also found the Tru-Mic to have a wider, roomier sound. Having it in the center makes for a great balance between the two. Overall, the preamp has great fidelity and I was able to play loudly without unwanted distortion.

All in all, the Cort Gold-Edge is a classy, distinguished model with a warm, rich low end and midrange and a bold sound. It's a great guitar for really digging in and is set up with quality electronics. I would recommend it for guitarists who play folk and country music, or any situation calling for a strong, vibrant sound that carries.

AG

SPECS

BODY Grand auditorium size with Venetian cutaway; torrefied solid Sitka spruce top; solid flamed myrtlewood back and sides; hand-scalloped X-bracing; ebony bridge; triple bevel cut (armrest, cutaway, ribrest); bone saddle

NECK Walnut-reinforced mahogany; DoubleLock neck joint; ebony fretboard; 25.3" scale length; 1-3/4" bone nut; Grover Vintage tuners

OTHER L.R. Baggs Anthem preamp; D'Addario EXP16 strings (.012-.053); hardshell case

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Orange Acoustic Pedal

A versatile and compact preamp for all acoustic-electric players

BY NICK MILLEVOI

A few years back, the British amplification company Orange entered the acoustic market with the introduction of the now-discontinued Acoustic Pre TC preamp. The Crush Acoustic 30 amplifier soon followed and, while both of those pieces of gear are very cool, they are targeted toward very specific players. Orange is now addressing more general acoustic amplification needs with its super practical new Acoustic Pedal preamp.

Orange has put its own spin on this latest entry into the growing market of similar devices. The Acoustic Pedal (\$169 street) is a single-ended class A preamp that runs at 18V,

giving the JFET circuit plenty of headroom to provide a clean and low-noise signal. The pedal's utilitarian circuitry makes it transparent, versatile, and especially useful. Its three-band EQ is easy to tweak: The fixed bass and treble knobs have a wide range, and the treble doesn't get too harsh, even at the highest settings. The middle control is fine-tuned with notch control and Q-Factor knobs, both of which I found helpful in dialing in everything from a robust, full-bodied sound to a more neutral, supportive tone. These two controls, along with a phase reverse switch, help avoid feedback as well.

The Acoustic Pedal's buffered effects loop is a nice feature that I took advantage of for running my looper and reverb pedals. The top-mounted balanced XLR output and the side-mounted 1/4-inch out can be used simultaneously, but I found the side of the pedal to be a little cramped when I used the effects loop and the 1/4-inch output together. This is a minor gripe that really has more to do with the pedal's small size and light weight than a design flaw, so I'm happy to call it the price you pay for an easily portable pedal.

For plugging into either an amp or a DAW,



I found the Acoustic Pedal to be a useful—and cool-looking!—addition to my setup that offers transparent EQ options whether using an undersaddle pickup or magnetic soundhole pickup. At \$169 street, it's a competitively priced alternative to the other acoustic preamps on the market and definitely worth considering. orangeamps.com

D'Addario XS Phosphor Bronze Strings

Innovative coated set offers great tone, long life, and smooth feel

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

For many years I have been more than satisfied with the D'Addario EJ16 Phosphor Bronze strings that came standard on most of my steel-string guitars. They're inexpensive, good-sounding, and consistent, and I have always appreciated the commitment to waste reduction that is apparent in their packaging.

But not long ago, I received D'Addario's XS strings (from \$17.99), an innovative new set that combines hyper-thin coating (one-tenth the thickness of a human hair) with NY Steel cores and Fusion Twist technology on the plain strings. Designed for longevity as well as pitch stability and resistance to breaking, the XSs are

available in phosphor bronze for six- and 12-string guitars and mandolins, in all of the common gauges (10–47, 11–52, 12–53, and 13–56 for six-string and 10–47 for 12-string).

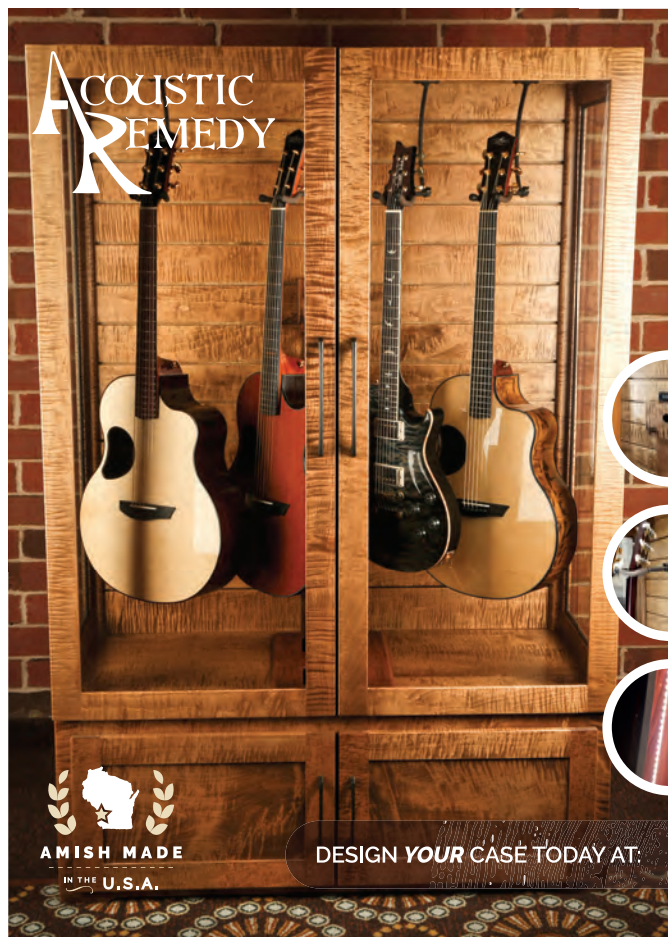
My 2018 Waterloo WL-S was sounding a bit sleepy—could it have had something to do with the fact that I had never changed the original strings?—so I was curious to restring the guitar with a set I wouldn't necessarily have thought to try, as I hadn't broken a string in years and do not seem to have corrosive sweat.

As with all D'Addario strings, the XS set has smart packaging, all six enclosed in a single sealed package. Unlike the EJ16s I'm used to,

with their rainbow-colored ball ends, those on the XSs are silver, black, or brass. The new strings (12–53 as reviewed) settled into pitch nicely, and the Waterloo felt reinvigorated, subtly punchier than it had when the previous strings were new. The XSs felt great, too; I might not have known they were coated had I not read the packaging.

A month after I first tried D'Addario's XS coated strings, they still sounded brilliant. Though they cost about 2.5 times the price of the EJ16s, their longevity, natural feel, and great tone are clearly worth the premium. daddario.com





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PLAYLIST

FLORENCIA P. MARANO

Soft Sound, Hard-Edged Words

Sunny War and her Guild dreadnought shine on evocative set

BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS

“Can’t get this melody outta my head,” sings Sunny War on “Big Baby,” the closing track of her latest release, *Simple Syrup*. “They say come now sweet lady/ Bring your big baby/ Broken guitar.”

After listening to *Simple Syrup*, you won’t be able to get the melodies of this one-of-a-kind songwriter/guitarist out of your head, either.

Big Baby is actually War’s nickname for her workhorse guitar, a 1989 Guild True American dreadnought that she’s played since her days busking on the boardwalk at Southern California’s Venice Beach. In “Big Baby” as in many of her songs, she treats the guitar more like a duet partner than a backup instrument, fingerpicking the melody along with her breathy voice and adding bluesy fills reminiscent of Malian guitar masters such as Ali Farka Toure. (The West African flavor of her playing is so strong that I was surprised to learn while interviewing War for *AG* a few years ago that she never heard that guitar tradition until fans pointed out the resemblance.)

War was musically productive during the pandemic shutdown; *Simple Syrup* follows two EPs and a single released in 2020, all recorded

at Hen House Studios in Venice, California. On much of *Simple Syrup*, she’s joined by her regular bandmates Paul Allen on drums and Aroyn Davis on bass, who deepen the grooves without obscuring the core sound of her voice and guitar.

Aside from one track on Stratocaster (the soothing “Lucid Lucy”), War played acoustic throughout—though you may not guess that based on the mixes. Producer Harlan Steinberger recorded her Guilds (the True American plus, on one song, a 1969 jumbo) with three AKG condenser mics, plus he captured the pickup output both direct and through a Magnatone amp. Steinberger then created different blends of all these sources from track to track—sometimes dialing in a more acoustic sound, sometimes a rounded tone closer to a hollow-body electric, depending on the song and the other instrumentation.

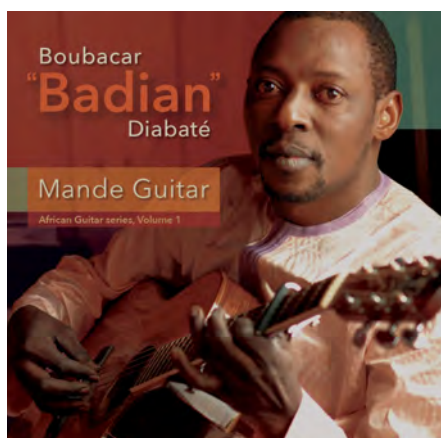
Like her previous albums, *Simple Syrup* has a soft style overall, tinged with melancholy. War’s lyrics have a much harder edge, however, addressing broken relationships and the kinds of struggles she knew well from years as a street kid. “All my friends are dead,” she sings

in “Lying on the Floor.” “The gangsters the punks . . . The junkies the drunks/ Halos over their heads.” She evokes the strange disconnection of the covid era in “Its Name is Fear,” and in “Deployed and Destroyed,” she tells the wrenching tale of a homeless vet in his 20s: “He only calls when he’s in jail/ Thinks I have money for his bail.”

Several standout tracks feature musical conversations. On “Mama’s Milk,” the band cues up a series of stop-time breaks in which War plays nimble cascading lines, ultimately trading bars with sax player Matt DeMerritt. And on “Like Nina,” War and frequent collaborator Milo Gonzalez engage in a spellbinding call and response on acoustic and electric guitar.

In the latter song, War connects to the image of Nina Simone, recognizing the “same sad look in my eyes,” and goes on to consider other iconic Black women artists. “Girls like us don’t dance like Tina/ Sing love songs like Aretha,” she sings. “Ain’t got no Beyhive.”

With all of her abundant gifts as a songwriter and guitarist, War clearly doesn’t need to do any of these things. On *Simple Syrup*, she sounds simply like herself. **AG**



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Volume 1 (Lion Songs)

Revelatory African guitar from a true master

Writing for the album’s press kit, Béla Fleck calls Badian Diabaté “a revelation.” Not to be outdone, Bill Frisell places Diabaté next to Jimi Hendrix, Wes Montgomery, and Andrés Segovia as one of the great innovators of our time. That’s saying a lot, and sure enough, there’s plenty of awesome to go around on *Mande Guitar*, the first album released on Banning Eyre’s Lion Songs Records.

To start, there are the ways Diabaté is pushing past his mentor, the late Bouba Sacko, applying all the technical advances that come with six strings, a fretboard, and a soundhole: a broader range of dynamics, an increased sensitivity to touch, an expanded tonal palette, and a greater control of intonation. More importantly, he’s reaching beyond technique to reimagine the thousand-year-old Mande repertoire, shifting rhythms, building counter melodies, improvising flourishes, and incorporating elements from outside the griot tradition.

How? Well, Diabaté opens the four-minute “Korosa” with a trilled, three-note, single-string run, quickly adds a second string, moves toward an increasingly complex call-and-response, changes tempo for a lulling, pastoral pattern passage, breaks rhythm with a syncopated counter melody, and develops a third melody that evolves into a full-bodied descant before breaking up again, spinning into any number of new directions. That’s just the first minute, and just one track out of 11, each one distinctly different. It’s a stunning collection, and even though the playing is unquestionably Malian, filled with a lush, impossible beauty, there are echoes of Portugal, Spain, and Brooklyn, where the album was recorded. An absolute gem. —*Kenny Berkowitz*



Bob Minner
Solo
 (Missouri Boy Music)

Top flatpicker gives new Collings a workout

Acting as an informal consultant to Collings Guitars last year, Bob Minner was fortunate to receive several iterations of a new model for feedback. In the process, Minner bonded so well with the CJ-45 T (see review on p. 76) that he used this vintage-inspired, slope-shouldered dreadnought to record (and mix and master) an entire album at home while sidelined during the pandemic from his main gig touring with the country singer-songwriter Tim McGraw.

Solo is the follow-up to 2019’s *Six String Sanctuary—A Collection of Acoustic Hymns*. The new album collects 11 unaccompanied traditional songs and originals, captured with a matched pair of Teegarden PPC-125MD microphones. Overall, it sounds warm and richly detailed, with each pick stroke clearly discernable and all of the notes sharply defined and blooming. It is a thoughtful and unhurried set; on each track you get the sense that Minner is luxuriating in the nuances and surprises inherent to the CJ-45 T, with its generous, forward voice.

In the hands of a lesser picker, the sound of someone discovering a new guitar might come across as indulgent, but perhaps what’s most striking about *Solo* is how completely compelling and engaging it is. Whether Minner is playing his gently rolling take on the Bill Monroe tune “Ashland Breakdown” or venturing into DADGAD tuning for his new composition “VanWart” (see transcription on p. 86), the guitarist picks everything with obvious care and intention, every note in its right place—and, most important, the melody always taking precedence. —*Adam Perlmutter*



C.E. Jones
The Goldberg Variations
 (Self-released)

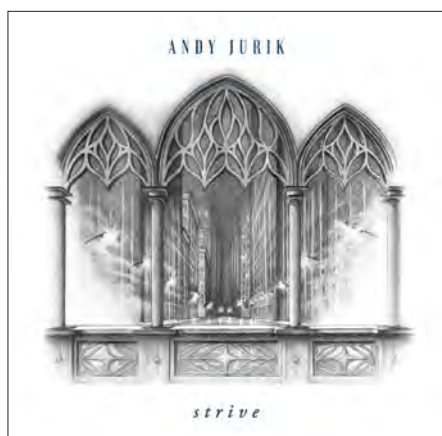
Imaginative melding of Bach and bluegrass

Baroque and bluegrass make not-so-strange bedfellows with C.E. (Christopher) Jones’ adaptation of *The Goldberg Variations*, J.S. Bach’s 30-piece suite bookended by two arias. Though they were originally scored for a harpsichord-led ensemble, Jones, a music professor and bluegrass player, has adapted the pieces for mandolin, banjo, and guitar.

It works, because baroque and bluegrass music are both based on improvisation and counterpoint, and like bluegrass instruments, the harpsichord is plucked, not struck like its musical descendant the piano. Jones replaces that high-end harpsichord with mandolin, the mid-range violins and violas with banjo, and the low-end cello and bassoon with guitar, which is plucked and never strummed. Jones’ acoustic instruments, all of which he plays, add separation to the compositions that harpsichord and piano, which blend into one harmonic texture, cannot.

All of Bach’s variations are in the same key and use the same chords as the opening aria, but there all similarities end. Jones’ guitar winds through each variation in different ways. On “Variation 3,” the labyrinthine guitar entwines with rippling banjo and brittle mandolin. By “Variation 21,” descending guitar grounds the of pointillist fairy-land mandolin and the banjo’s fluttering ornamentation. Mandolin dominates the “Aria Capo” that concludes the album, but Jones’ guitar slides into open spaces and asserts itself with a swaying melody.

With *The Goldberg Variations*, Jones has embraced the shapeshifting nature of the compositions by making even more changes. In his hands, the variations are only waiting for more variations. —*Pat Moran*



Andy Jurik

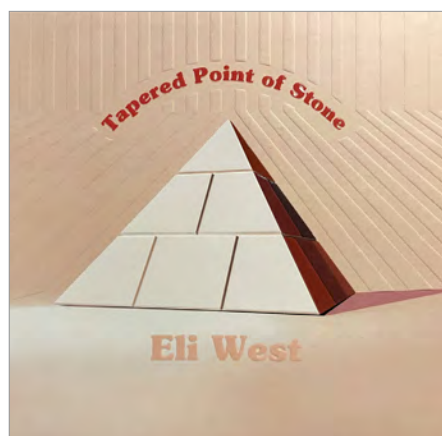
Strive

(Self-released)

A stimulating and wide-ranging solo collection

Andy Jurik is a proud eclectic, a superb classical guitarist who also embraces pop, folk, and jazz traditions, and this album is quite a showcase for his incredibly diverse interests. For instance, *Strive* is blessed with three pieces by Brazilian composer Ernesto Nazareth (1863–1934), whose melodic piano works were influenced by Brazilian folk music, as well as Chopin, and have proven to be nicely transferable to guitar. On the other end of the spectrum there's Jurik's fascinating reworking of Radiohead's "Exit Music (for a Film)," which appeared on the band's 1997 breakthrough album, *OK Computer*. The moody Radiohead version starts out as a solo acoustic guitar tune before singer Thom Yorke enters with some of his typically angst-y vocals, and then bass, drums, and various electronic layers enter the fray. So, Jurik's solo guitar version marks a serious, but successful departure. Likewise, his version of Paul McCartney's "Blackbird," long a pleasant staple of fingerstyle guitarists, is smartly rearranged here: Jurik uses the familiar bones of the piece as jumping-off points for some really inventive extrapolations that take the song to some new places.

Among the less-known composers on the album are Mark Summer, whose compelling "Julie-O" has some of the DNA of steel-string masters such as John Fahey, Leo Kottke, and Will Ackerman, but still feels original; percussionist Ivan Trevino, whose "Strive to Be Happy" was originally a hypnotic solo marimba piece; and Nicholas Walker—his "Chorale" has echoes of early hymns, but also takes interesting detours. A fine album from beginning to end. —Blair Jackson



Eli West

Tapered Point of Stone

(Tender & Mild)

Thoughtful old-time and newgrass ideas coalesce

There's an architectural quality to *Tapered Point of Stone*, a careful sense of craft that methodically builds from one note and one instrument to the next. You can hear it in West's choice of guitars—a pair of well-aged 1930s Martins that he plays alongside banjo and mandolin—and you can feel it in the richly sympathetic trio he's enlisted: Andrew Marlin (Mandolin Orange) on mandolin, Clint Mullican (Mandolin Orange) on bass, and Christian Sedelmeyer (Jerry Douglas band) on fiddle.

West works as a designer, so it's no coincidence the album's strongest songs have something to do with space, from the title track's advice to build "a house of soul and bone" to "The Hearth," where a fireplace is the only thing left standing in "a house undone by time," and "Brick in the Road," where West tries to find his way in the cobbled streets of Wales. Deeply rooted in the Pacific Northwest, West has a keen sense of place that gives his playing on guitar, clawhammer banjo, and mandolin a fine-grained sensibility, a thoughtfulness, and a warm precision.

Flatpicking the Martins, West's touch is light, nimble, and beautifully fluid, without a hard edge in sight, and whether he's writing songs or instrumentals, the ideas are first-rate, combining the concision of old-time with the far-ranging improvisation of newgrass. After 2016's *The Both*, the surprise here isn't that the pieces are so well-structured and the notes so well-placed, but that all these elements combine so naturally into a richly emotional, deeply satisfying whole. —KB



Adam Cicchillitti and Steve Cowan

Intimate Impressions (Analekta)

Ravel, Debussy, and more on two-guitar set

Described in the liner notes as "20th century works written in Paris," this fantastic album by Canadian classical guitarists Adam Cicchillitti and Steve Cowan draws heavily on their own arrangements of piano works by French Impressionist composers Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy, but also includes Federico Mompou's sumptuous "Musica Callada," a beautiful harp sonata by Germaine Tailleferre, and a contemporary two-guitar piece by Andre Jolivet. The sonic palette is broad and deep—the melodies rich without being overbearing, the harmonies sometimes unconventional and unpredictable, the textures lush but still tasteful.

Cicchillitti and Cowan have worked together enough that they have developed the necessary duo telepathy that allows them to gracefully and effortlessly pass musical ideas back and forth, sometimes completing each other's thoughts, it seems, other times answering with bold new statements and ideas. The arrangements are universally brilliant; kudos to both for developing fresh repertoire for the guitar. Each guitarist also has a solo spotlight: Cicchillitti on Debussy's *Arabesque, No. 1* and Cowan on Ravel's *Pavane pour une infante défunte*. Jolivet's *Sérénade* is the only piece with what I would call late-20th century sensibilities (it was written in the '50s), yet it somehow fits in well amidst the more melodic fare. And, in truth, Ravel and Debussy were modern for their time: You can hear their influence on composers as diverse as Gershwin, Stravinsky, a number of early jazz and pop songwriters, and even on minimalists such as Steve Reich. These two virtuosos are clearly at the top of their game. —BJ



Cristina Vane
Nowhere Sounds Lovely
 (Self-released)

Exciting patchwork of country and blues

With her debut album, *Nowhere Sounds Lovely*, Italian-born Cristina Vane trains her outsider's eye on America. Drawing on a number of guitar styles, including acoustic fingerpicking, coruscating electric, and her specialty—slide guitar that shifts smoothly from spare to a powerful tsunami—Vane tries to find what makes this patchwork quilt of a country tick.

The Princeton-educated, current Nashville resident draws on early blues, Appalachian rambles, and Western waltzes to essay her emotional roadmap of America, even repurposing some well-known song titles. Not the Fats Domino hit, “Blueberry Hill” is an original propelled by Vane’s winding electric bolstered by her slide guitar’s arching accents. The tune details a southland both mythic and mundane, with motel breezeways populated by spiders and snakes. Vane’s elegant whiplash slide entwines with her bent-note acoustic in “Travelin’ Blues,” her manifesto to finding America beyond the interstate. She also evokes the Dakota “Badlands,” mythologized as sacred native ground as well as Wounded Knee killing fields, with electric guitar that whips like a prairie wind.

Vane changes guitars and styles with each setting. Her wailing, locomotive slide circles screech-owl fiddle in “Heaven Bound Station,” and her rugged but violence-prone dream lover is embodied in “Dreamboy” by her growling electric guitar.

Vane’s road trip shoots for self-discovery. “You gotta get lost to get your feet back on the ground,” she sings in “Traveling Blues.” Along the way she encounters America through rain-spattered windshields, ramshackle motels, and roadside honky-tonks. But the landscape is inspiring—and it floats by like a dream. —PM



John Doyle
The Path of Stones
 (Compass Records)

Timeless Irish music feels fresh and new

I know John Doyle through his work with the great Irish American band Solas, but I must confess I was ignorant of his solo career (seven previous albums!), not to mention his stints playing with Mary Chapin Carpenter, Joan Baez, Linda Thompson, and others. So forgive this gushing from a relative newbie: This has become one of my favorite albums of Irish traditional music.

The Dublin-born Doyle has it all—a heart-melting tenor voice, emotion-filled original songs and instrumentals that have the timeless quality of the best folk music, and spectacular instrumental chops on various guitars (six-string, “five-string high guitar,” 12-string), mandolin, mandola, and bouzouki. Plus, he engineered and produced the album! All but one song feature multiple layered parts by the left-handed Doyle, sometimes contrasting strumming and deft fingerpicking, or six- and 12-string, with mandola and bouzouki added in sympathetically here and there. It’s a marvelous blend of textures, each given its own sonic space and augmented very tastefully by the occasional fiddle, cello, flute, harmonium, and bodhrán.

There is nothing in Doyle’s unfailingly poetic lyrics that would place any of these songs in modern times. Indeed, the only temporal reference is to the California Gold Rush in “Her Long Hair Flowing Down.” But evocative images of nature and the land abound, and there is much to be sung about fair ladies and lost or unrequited love. The instrumentals include spry reels, jigs, a heart-rending air, and a cool romp in 11/4 time, “Elevenses.” —BJ

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VanWart

Bob Minner's DADGAD tribute to Collings Guitars' master luthier

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

In October 2020, Bob Minner was in a Zoom songwriting session with the singer-songwriter Lori McKenna, who frequently plays guitar in DADGAD tuning. As a formidable flat-picker, Minner spends most of his time in standard or dropped-D tuning, but so that he and McKenna would be in the same headspace, he got into DADGAD for the meeting.

After that, Minner felt inspired to use the tuning in composing a solo instrumental piece. "I had messed with DADGAD before in the past, but never in terms of creating anything full form," he says. "The tune fell out pretty quick. It wasn't anything I sweated or labored over; it sort of presented itself in raw form, then it was just a matter of cleaning it up and structuring it."

Minner's composition "VanWart" is a tribute to Collings Guitars' master luthier

Bruce VanWart, who, as the company's first employee, has had his hands on each of the more than 30,000 acoustic guitars Collings has made since 1989. "Bruce and I hit it off instantly the first time I visited the shop," Minner says. "I just wanted to honor him with a tune, out of friendship and respect for what he does." The tune appears on Minner's latest album, *Solo* (see review on p. 83).

"VanWart," which is in the key of D major, started out as an improvisation, from which three distinct sections emerged, each including some of the colorful harmonies inherent to DADGAD. The first (A) focuses on the I (D7) and ♭III (F 6/9) chords in a cool cross-picking pattern; the second (B) sees the introduction of the IV chord (G7); the third (C) changes things up with some graceful rolling arpeggios, toggling between Gmaj9/B and C 6/9 chords.



MIKE LUCKETT

The notation here is based on the accompanying video, which is similar to the album version but has a bit of variation in the details. Be sure to listen to both to get a sense of these differences, which you can use to inform your own performance. In doing this, Minner suggests using the notation just as a guide. "Don't be afraid of messing up," he advises. "If you hear it in your head, go for it. There are 'good' mistakes in playing, in that they turn into something beneficial given the right adaptation and approach." **AC**

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Tuning: D A D G A D

Intro

♩ = 142 (♩♩ = $\overset{\frown}{\underset{\frown}{\text{3}}}$)

D_{sus4}

harm.

5

A**D₇**

5

9

F₉

13

D_{sus4}**D_m****D₅**

17

B

G7

21

3 5 5 3 5 2 5 0 0 0 3 5 0 5 3 2 5 0 0 3 0 3 ^{1/4}

5 5 5

D5 **Dm** **D5** **D_{sus4}**

25

0 0 0 2 0 0 0 0 3 0 3 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

0 0 0 3 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

G7

29

3 5 5 3 5 2 5 0 5 0 5 3 5 0 5 3 2 5 0 5 0

5 5 5 0 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5

Dm **D_{sus4}** **8^{va}**

33

0 4 5 0 2 3 0 0 3 0 0 3 0 0 5 5 5 5 5 5 0 0

3 0 0 3 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

harm.

Play A section **Play B section (1st 14 bars)** **D5**

37

16 14

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 2 0 0 2 0 0 2 2 2 2 0 0 0 0

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0



C

70 **Gmaj9/B** **C₉⁶**

74 **Gmaj9/B** **C₉⁶** **Gadd9/B** **C₉⁶**

**For ease of reading, doubled Gs
not shown in standard notation.*

1.

78 **D₅**

2.

82 **D_{sus4}** **D₅**

Play A section

Play A section
(1st 8 bars)

Play C section
(1st 8 bars)

Play intro riff
(2 times)

86

Jerry Garcia's 1943 Martin D-28

A classic acoustic finds
a new home, new players

BY BLAIR JACKSON

Andy Logan is more than a guitar collector. Yes, he owns instruments with historic pedigrees—like the two axes he picked up at a Bonham's auction in December 2019 from the estate of Jerry Garcia. His marquee purchase was Garcia's famed "Alligator" Strat, for a whopping \$420,000. But that day he also picked up Garcia's well-worn 1943 Martin D-28 for a more modest \$175,000. It's cool owning original instruments played by your heroes, but Logan's Grateful Dead obsession goes much further.

As a guitarist himself, and a man of means, to put it colloquially, Logan has spent enormous sums amassing as many Garcia- and Bob Weir-connected guitars as he can—tracking down precise makes/models/years, and also commissioning builders to create *exact* clones of the incredible custom instruments the guitarists played in the band, "trying to have a representative version of *all* their guitars, from '65 to '95," he says. And it's not to put them in some museum. He has given away clones to jam-band guitarists, loaned out others, and even lets guitarists play the originals he owns—under his supervision. "They're all meant to be *played*," says Logan emphatically. His nonprofit Grateful Guitars foundation assists in matching instruments with players.

Garcia's D-28—Adirondack spruce top, Brazilian rosewood back and sides—was likely acquired by the guitarist in the late spring of 1970, before his group's famous trans-Canada train trip with The Band, Janis Joplin, Delaney & Bonnie, et al., immortalized in the film *Festival Express*. It also turned up during the Dead's acoustic sets that summer and fall, and it was likely Garcia's acoustic on the Dead's landmark *American Beauty*, and on some non-Dead sessions in the early '70s. "Jerry gave away a lot of his acoustics, so the fact that he had held on to this one means a lot," Logan says.

The guitar's pre-Garcia history is unknown. It has replacement tuners, bridge pins, saddle, and nut. "It looks like it had an old pickup on it," Logan adds, "probably before Jerry owned it, because it has two areas on either side of the soundhole where the wood had been filled, which would have been where controls for a pickup would have been."

How does the D-28 sound? "Amazing!" Logan enthuses. "You play the beginning of 'Ripple' on it and it's *that sound* . . . just incredible!"

AG



BECKY LOGAN



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